SPECIAL GIANT ISSUE - 244 Pages

AMAZING STORIES

See BACK COVER

JANUARY 25c

The TEST TUBE GIRL

By FRANK PATTON

MYSTERY of the BLUE GOD by HARRY BATES

VOLUME 16 NUMBER 1

AMAZING STORIES

JANUARY 1942

In leather-neck language

"LISTERINE HAS LANDED

and the situation is well in hand!"

Tested treatment attacks infection. 76% of test cases noted marked improvement in symptoms. Easy, quick, delightful. No mess, no grease.

ITCHY SCALP and inflammation, tell-tale flakes and scales are plenty of trouble for anybody, even for a husky Marine who takes trouble as it comes!

These are symptoms that shouldn't be neglected, for dandruff is often infectious. And these symptoms may mean that *you* have the infectious type of dandruff . . . that millions of germs are at work on your scalp.

Now, the sensible way to fight an infectious condition is with antiseptic action which attacks large numbers of the germs that accompany the infection *and quickly kills them.*

When Listerine Antiseptic is massaged onto your scalp, it's the finish of literally millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff! Even the strange and stubborn "bottle bacillus" is killed in vast numbers! This is the same "bottle bacillus"—Pityrosporum ovale—that many leading authorities brand as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

Listerine gives scalp and hair a cool, invigorating antiseptic bath. Ugly, loosened dandruff scales begin to disappear. Itching and irritation are relieved. Your scalp feels better, your hair looks cleaner.

Scientific tests showed amazing results. In one series of clinical tests, under exacting conditions, 76% of the dandruff sufferers who used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice a day showed complete disappearance of, or marked improvement in, the symptoms within a month.

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WOMEN: Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic.

Always follow with vigorous and persistent massage. Listerine is the same antiseptic that has been famous for more than 50 years as a gargle.

Listerine for INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF *the tested treatment*

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NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.
BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE, THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM. UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
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Established 25 Years

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AMAZING STORIES

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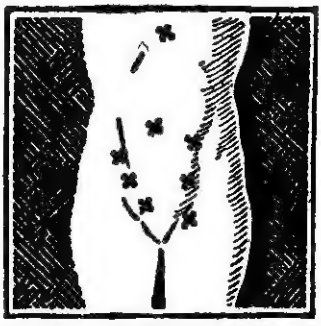
Volume 16
Number 1

IS YOUR Rupture GETTING Worse?

It is a terrible thing to feel that your rupture is getting worse, growing larger and larger, without your *seeming* to be able to do anything about it! Haunting fear destroys mental poise and makes many *despondent*. Inability to be active takes the *physical joys* out of life.

Yes, it is terrible . . . but far more a tragedy when it is all *so absolutely needless!* Now please—and again please—do not think that this is an attempt to capitalize on your misfortune in an effort to just sell you something. We simply have information for you that has brought deliverance and joy to about 3,000,000 persons: men, women and children . . . *facts* that have satisfied thousands of doctors . . . facts we want *you* to consider, to your everlasting good!



X Where's YOUR Rupture?

STOP IT, STOP IT!

AS sure as you live and breathe, if you have a reducible rupture, you can *stop your rupture worries* and once again find the world, your work, your pleasures so full of joy and happiness that you will be an utterly new person . . . alive, vivid, energetic and happy past all the old nightmare fears that have been making your existence a bad dream.

There is no claptrap magic about the famous Brooks Air-Cushion Rupture Appliance. It isn't something experimental. It has been used and improved for years. Over 9000 doctors (who know about rupture) wear the BROOKS, or recommend it to many, many thousands of patients. What is the Patented Automatic Air-Cushion? Just this.

WRONG

Hard pad gouging in keeps Rupture open and prevents natural healing.

RIGHT

BROOKS Air-Cushion does not spread rupture opening. Gives nature a real opportunity!

It is the part of the BROOKS Appliance that holds back your rupture—the most important part of any truss. It is a yielding, air-filled rubber chamber designed to a shape that clings, that holds with complete security *without gouging in.* Understand that—*without gouging in!* Ill-fitting, incorrectly designed trusses, as you know all too well, *do* gouge in.

Now here is what happens. The Brooks Air-Cushion *avoids* spreading the rupture opening and making it larger, the way some trusses do. Well, when the BROOKS permits the edges of the rupture opening to remain as close together as possible, Nature has the best chance to step in and close the opening. Mind you we don't guarantee this. But if you have reducible rupture, the BROOKS is designed to work with nature. And thousands of BROOKS users have reported the abandonment of any truss.

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BROOKS APPLIANCE CO.
152 STATE STREET MARSHALL, MICH.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

Brooks Appliance Co.
152 State St., Marshall, Mich.

In PLAIN ENVELOPE, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER. No one is to call on me personally about my rupture.

Name .....

Street .....

City ..... State .....

State whether for Man ☐, Woman ☐, or Child ☐.

The OBSERVATORY by THE Editor

HERE it is, readers—another big issue with enough entertainment to kite you higher than the moon with sheer joy. And believe us, we've had as much fun as a barrel of monkeys preparing it for you! Let us know how you like it.

WE won't say a thing about the stories in this issue, because we have a hunch you are going to say it for us. Especially Harry Bates, Frank Patton, Festus Pragnell (who, despite the war, writes better and better Don Hargreaves yarns), Robert Moore Williams, and Alfred Bester. These lads have given us something really fine, we think.

HARRY BATES, who has never appeared in our pages, is nevertheless one of the ace science fiction authors in the field today. He attained quite a bit of fame, also, as an inventor, and we understand he's still working at it. Hope he invents a gadget as good as the story in this big issue!

INCIDENTALLY, talking about fame, some of you old-time readers may remember a guy named Hawk Carse. And an author named Anthony Gilmore. At one time, about eight or nine years ago, hundreds of fans engaged in a great hunt to discover his identity. They found out very little, except that author Anthony Gilmore wrote the Hawk Carse stories. We, ourselves, don't care. All we know is that Hawk Carse, authored by Anthony Gilmore, is coming back to science fiction! Which is great news. We'll prove it to you in a few months! And how. Just don't miss the event for your own good!

"Miss Warren, I don't want to see any more callers today!"

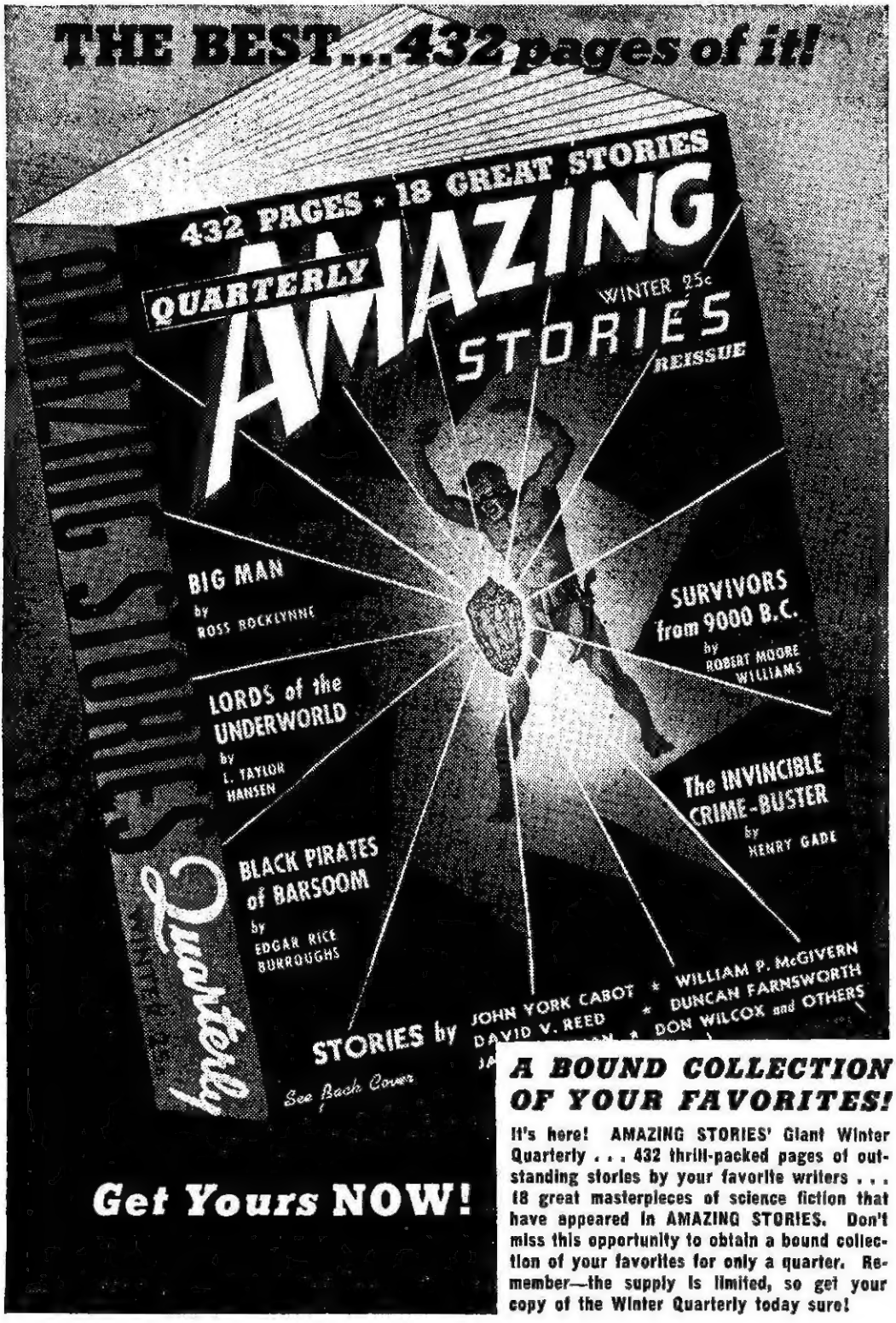
NEXT month we introduce still another new cover artist. He's L. Raymond Jones, and he's painted something pretty nice in illustrating a scene from a story by William P. McGivern called "Kidnaped Into The Future". It features what might be called the "Jones" girl, and we think you'll like the little lassie he's created. It's a rather striking color combination too, and we think it will meet with your entire approval.

THEN, with either the March or April issues, we'll bring the famed "Mac Girl" to Amazing Stories. If you read our companion magazine, Fantastic Adventures, you've seen her many times already, but we predict, never as you'll see her on our front cover. It is a McCauley painting we are proud to present.

ONE of our best writers, Robert Moore Williams, recently visited New York, and while coming out of an office building, met a certain fan, who, upon introduction said: "Oh, you're the fellow who turns the crank for Amazing Stories!" and accompanied it with rotating gestures.

All your editor can say is Anybody who can dish out stories like he does, sure turns a mean crank!

AUTHOR Isaac Asimov returns to his fictional birthplace with a sale to your editor based on a robot who gets lost. This wouldn't ordinarily be a strange idea, except for the fact that the robot was created for a special job, and by Heaven! he was going to do it. Here's another chap who can "turn the crank" upon occasion!



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The TEST TUBE

GIRL

By
Frank Patton

"Look at her! That's what she needs! A sun bath! She's like a flower in the sun!"

Nowhere in the world any more children—except one baby in a test tube! Was mankind doomed to die?

"LOOK, Allan, my boy, how beautiful it is—" the man in the soiled laboratory smock waved a trembling hand toward the ghostly, moonlit city spread far below the tiny veranda high in the tower of Eugenic Laboratories "—and in a few more minutes we will know whether or not it will all vanish from the Earth. . . .

"And in a few minutes, I, Henri Varrone, the man those desperate millions down there believe to be the greatest of all biologists, will know whether they are right, or horribly wrong. . . ."

"No! Wait—don't do it!"

Allan Sutton's hoarse shout interrupted the biologist's sombre tones.

Varrone whirled about, bewildered.

"What. . . ." he began, then, as Sutton stared upward in horror, his gaze went up the facade of the building beside the veranda to a window ledge.

A white-clad figure was outlined in the moonlight, standing on the very edge of the stone sill. It was a woman, her face pale, tragic, drawn.

"Myra!" called Sutton in a stricken whisper now that carried weirdly through the still night air. "Don't jump. . . ."

Then, as though released from a momentary paralysis, he began to edge

forward, toward the veranda rail, and to a ledge immediately below the poised girl.

Drawn by his voice, here eyes turned down, and for a moment looked straight into his. They stopped him in his tracks with what he saw mirrored in them.

For a long instant she stared, then she moaned softly.

"My baby," she said in stricken tones. "I suffered so long for her. . . . And she isn't even *human*—"

Abruptly her gaze tore from the pair on the veranda, cast skyward a moment, then turned down to the dark street below. She jumped.

Up from the depths, seventy stories down, drifted a thin, eerie scream that vanished into silent nothingness.

"Henri. . . ." gasped Sutton. "Henri —she—she killed herself. . . . I couldn't get to her to stop her. . . ."

The old biologist's face was ashen.

"Poor girl." His voice trembled. "She had such high hopes, such firm belief that her baby would be normal. . . . ." He turned and stared out over the city, toward the east. Suddenly his face flamed with anger and he raised a clenched fist and shook it at the horizon. "All because of one man! One human beast who wanted to rule the world!"

Quick footsteps sounded behind them now, and a third man burst out on the veranda.

"What was that scream?" he asked in alarmed tones. "Something happen out here. . . .?"

"Nothing that hasn't happened a thousand times already today, Harland," said Varrone quietly now. "It was Myra . . . she just jumped from her window. Her baby was born this afternoon—"

Harland Lanier's handsome face paled.

"You mean. . . ."

"Yes. Her baby was a monster."

"That leaves us only two more chances," said Lanier.

"Yes, the test tube baby, and Alice."

"Alice is dying!" Lanier said harshly.

The old biologist nodded.

"I know. And in a few moments now we will know whether we can let her die in peace, or. . . ."

Lanier glanced at his watch.

"Come on," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse. "It's time."

THEY went inside the laboratory, passing from the pale moonlight on the balcony into the brilliance of artificial daylight in the great room itself. The contrast made them blink a moment, then when they had accustomed themselves to the change, Henri Varrone stripped off his soiled laboratory gown, stepped to a sterilizer and began washing his hands meticulously. Allan Sutton and Harland Lanier did the same.

Moments later they were ready, and with a serious look on his features, the master biologist advanced toward a large glass-and-metal machine mounted in the middle of the laboratory floor. It was surrounded by complex mechanisms that breathed and pulsed with a rhythm that was uncannily lifelike, somehow simulating the beat of a human heart. There were dials and meters and controls; bubbling liquids in crystal globes and tubes, deliberately whirling fly-wheels and balances.

And in the center of it all, the vat-like machine itself was a gleaming cylinder of glass, filled with a viscous, transparent liquid in which floated a perfect human embryo, fully developed. As they stared at it, the tiny legs kicked vigorously.

"Yes," nodded Varrone, "she's ready. She's alive, healthy, and free from any deformity that instruments can detect. Whether all her glands are normal, we

can't know for several months yet."

"If she lives when we take her out of there," said Lanier soberly.

Varrone shot a glance at Lanier's face, and he frowned. But he said nothing, although it was obvious that deep inside him Lanier's shot had hit home. They had failed before, in artificial incubation.

"Get the case-records on this embryo," he instructed heavily. "Read them back to me. We must make no mistakes."

Lanier produced them from a lab table nearby.

"I had them ready," he said. Then he opened the book and scanned its pages. He began reading in a level, precise voice.

"Embryo 154. Removed from mother approximately five and one-half weeks; removal completed three minutes twenty-seven seconds after death due to loss of blood from slashed wrists. Foetus revived to life under sub-microelectric impulses at B-intensity.*

"Embryo 154, placed in Wagner saline-solution, gradually acclimatized to incubation, and after two hours, placed in incubation, and nourished with dilute blood serum, 34.2 male blood, type 4, 65.8 pure glucose . . ."

Varrone interrupted the flow of Lanier's voice.

"Skip the period until the final ten days."

Lanier paged smoothly through the book, then paused again. His voice resumed.

"First muscular reaction observed. Embryo exposed to X-ray examination, one-fifth second duration to assure complete lack of effect on reproductive glands, to determine structural condition. Formation perfect, except for slight atrophy of left hand.

"Response to all chemo-therapy examination excellent. Coordination 98.9%. No signs of cellular damage during period of death after death of mother. Artificial birth estimated August 11, approximately 11 PM."

Here Lanier paused a brief moment, then resumed with a queer note in his voice.

"Test shut-down of Lindbergh activator mechanism negative. No signs of individual response."

He snapped the book shut.

"That's it," he said. "No signs of response."

Varrone's lips tightened.

"Could mean anything, could mean nothing," he said. "Until the embryo

---

* Early in 1944, Professor Eamaus T. Whittacker of the Dowling Institute of Military Technology, experimenting with sub-electronic radiations in ekauranium, discovered an ultra short microwave of much shorter length than the gamma rays he was examining. Unable to gain any positive reaction, beyond the recording on his meters, he worked in the dark for two months before he accidently exposed a freshly slain guinea pig to the rays and was startled to observe signs of life in a corpse he was absolutely certain had been stilled of all life processes. Thinking that he had created an artificial and false "life" by electrical muscular stinulus, he abandoned the field opened to him.

Only a year later, Dr. Ira Waldron, of the New York Technological Society, stumbled onto the same reaction, and definitely isolated the rays and found them to be basically related to the mystery of life itself. He was able to revive dead animals almost at will, provided they had not been dead more than a period of seven minutes and twenty one seconds, beyond which point cellular deterioration had progressed to such a state life was impossible.

Toward the disastrous close of the war, Dr. Walton astounded the scientific world by taking his apparatus to the battlefield and reviving a soldier who had been killed by a bolt from an electrogun.

Thus, the discovery of the "life ray" in the microelectric wavelengths made possible feats of surgery that would otherwise have been impossible, and was instrumental in saving countless lives that would have been lost because of failure of the normal life impulses.

It was this ray that saved the life of Henri Varrone's embryo, when it was removed from a mother who had gone mad and who had committed suicide by slashing her wrists.—Ed.

is removed from the solution, there could be no definite reaction."

"However, if there had been, we'd have been sure there would be no still-birth," Sutton cut in.

Varrone shrugged.

"We'd have been sure of nothing," he said. "But I would have been much encouraged had there been a slight individual reaction."

LANIER stepped forward and began efficiently preparing a silken net to scoop the embryo from the incubator vat. Then he removed the cover, mounted a ladder, swung the net into position, and dropped it slowly.

It sank, enveloped the embryo, and Lanier skillfully drew it shut with looped cords. Then he turned to face Varrone and Sutton, who had leaped to the incubator controls.

"Go ahead," he said evenly. "I'll sever the umbilical connections the instant the power is cut."

Sutton spun dials, opened switches, and pressed levers. With each one an individual humming mechanism died. When he had finished, Varrone pulled the master switch out and with a receding whine, the entire machine became silent.

Lanier made several quick motions, then swung the net out of the thick liquid. Varrone, waiting to receive it, got a bath of the streaming stuff, but ignored it. Guiding the swinging net to a padded rubber table, he opened it, seized the limp figure within, and swung it aloft by the heels. He slapped the embryo on the buttocks smartly several times. But there was no response.

"Microelectric therapy!" he snapped. "Quick!"

Sutton wheeled the apparatus up swiftly, depressed its ray cone down upon the rubberoid table, and pressed a switch. A thin scream of energy keened swiftly up the scale into inaudibility.

For a moment Varrone watched the little figure anxiously, then waved a hand. Sutton cut the rays off. Once more Varrone held the lifeless figure aloft, slapped it sharply.

Lanier's face was white. He stepped forward.

"Let me try," he said.

He snatched the tiny form from Varrone, and swinging it rhythmically by the heels, slapped it vigorously for more than a minute. He increased the tempo almost frantically. All at once a thin cry came, and Varrone, beside him, exclaimed exultantly.*

"There! She's coming around!"

Lanier cradled the baby in one big hand and stared down as it gasped several times, then began to cry in a reedy, weak voice.

"It's alive!" he gasped. "Alive!"

Varrone sank down into a lab chair, utter relief on his features.

"Certainly," he chuckled. "When a baby cries, it's alive."

But as he spoke, the thin, piping voice ceased, and the child lay still in Lanier's big palm.

Abruptly Lanier resumed the rhythmic swinging and spanking. Varrone rose slowly to his feet, his face slowly going grey. He watched for a moment, then he stepped forward and placed a hand on Lanier's arm.

"Stop," he croaked. "It's no use. The child is dead."

Lanier and Sutton stared at him dazedly.

"Dead," repeated Varrone, like a man who's soul had shriveled. "It's the

*Sometimes the task of making a baby take its first breath is a rather difficult one, and the youngster is treated to quite a vigorous thrashing to make it respond, cry, and draw the necessary breath to start its lungs to pumping. The rhythmic swinging is also a means of startling the nervous system into reaction.—Ed.

end. *She's stillborn, and Hitler's rays have slain the human race."**

CHAPTER II

A Fight in the Park

IT WAS cool and quiet in Central Park, where Allan Sutton had gone to quiet the turmoil in his mind. All about, New York lay dark and seemingly deserted. Even persons on the brink of madness get tired; and despairing New York was asleep.

There were none of the brilliant lights that once made New York a city of day through all the twenty-four hours. There was none of the hustle and bustle of traffic; none of the music and gay voices that heralded the pleasure-bent people of the night; none of the strolling couples to whom Central Park had always been a paradise where they could be aloof and alone, millions of miles from other people. It was this last that struck home most violently to Sutton as he sat on a dusty park bench.

Love had gone out of the world. The sacred institution of the family, the basis of civilization, was gone. In its place reigned despair, hate, madness, suicide, and rampant crime.

The world was dying, slain by an invisible, silent ray of sterility that had smitten womankind, destroyed her miraculous power to reproduce her race, to perpetuate it. In fifty or sixty more years, the last man would die of old age. The Age of Man on Earth would have passed forever.

All the other species of life Nature had created, she had destroyed, either because they were impracticable, or they lacked virility. Man had destroyed himself, by fighting a grim war of science. Hitler had invented a weapon that had been more deadly than he knew. An atom-smashing weapon that had generated a deadly ray; a subtle ray that had fatally altered the function of that mysterious gland in women, in all women, that was man's perpetuation. And the grim truth was that man was unworthy—had anticipated Nature's vengeance by eliminating himself.

And as Allan Sutton sat there, a great shame flooded through his soul. He

* Here we have the cause of the great crisis that faced humanity at the abrupt close of the Second World War. Early in 1943, Hitler, faced with an impasse, his armies held at bay by the Russian Bear, and by a Britain made powerful through American aid, introduced a weapon his scientists had deemed too terrible to use. It was a great ray-cannon which was an outgrowth of the electro-guns which generated an electrical beam thin as a hair, but deadly as a lightning bolt. This super-ray actually destroyed the atom, causing tremendous explosions, but in actual use, Hitler found it to be more dangerous to the army using it, and not as effective as Britain's super bombs. After two months of use, he reverted back to heavy artillery and dive-bombers.

It was not until the closing days of the war, when Hitler had been forced to sue for peace after Europe became a hive of uncontrollable revolt, that it was discovered that the super ray cannons had had an effect unsuspected by the scientists. Radio engineers had puzzled over strange interference in transmission during the two month period when the rays had been used, but did not attribute the disturbance to the new cannons. However, no corner of the Earth remained untouched by the incredibly short waves generated by bursting atoms, and although no outward effect was visible, the fate of humanity was sealed by a very simple biological factor. All over the world, women were either rendered sterile, barren because of the destructive effect of the short waves, or those who could bear offspring found themselves the parents of evolutionary monstrosities that were too horrible to let live.

Faced with the fact that mankind was doomed, scientists sought feverishly for a cure, and failed. Nowhere in the world was a normal baby born. Countless thousands committed suicide, and countless thousands went mad, deranged by the abnormal physiological and psychological reactions of their glandular functions.

The last hope lay in Greater New York, where Henri Varrone, greatest living biologist, experimented with the few remaining, nearly normal women to whom pregnancy was possible. Harland Lanier, two years Allan Sutton's senior, was his chief aide, and Sutton himself, who perfected the incubator mechanism, and who was really the genius of the trio, became the third assistant.—Ed.

felt mankind's failure as a personal failure.

"We're no good," he muttered bitterly. "No better than the dinosaurs; than the mammoth; than the dodo. We deserve extinction."

And yet, his mind fought for a solution to the problem. Why was it that woman's virility had been lost? If one ray had destroyed a vital something, an important hormone, could not another ray restore it?

Restore? What was left to restore?

In all New York remained but one woman with child. A waif of the streets, whom he knew only as Alice. And Alice could not live long enough to bear her child. The white plague of civilization held her inexorably.

"Poor child," he muttered. "And now we must take her child from her, and try for the last time . . ."

He rose to his feet, fists clenched in impotence.

"And we'll fail again!" he exclaimed. "The incubator is perfect. It can complete human birth without the mother. But it can't restore what Hitler has destroyed! That's why we'll fail again. Henri knows it. But he'll fight on, because he's that kind of a man."

"Let's see what kind of a man *you* are!" came a harsh voice behind him. "Let's see *you* fight!"

SUTTON whirled around to face a bearded, ragged giant of a man, in whose eyes glinted the lights of madness and bestiality. And as Sutton faced him, he leaped.

A heavy fist crashed against Sutton's chest, sending him hurtling with stunning force into a clump of bushes. Thorns tore at him, and red blood mingled with the green smear of crushed leaves on his white shirt.

Then the attacker lunged down on him, ignoring the brambles in which he lay. As the breath crushed out of his lungs, Allan Sutton knew that he faced a killer. He knew that before him was a battle for life itself. And with that animal instinct called self-preservation, he drew up his legs and kicked outward with all his strength.

The big man's body crashed backward, against a tree, and Sutton scrambled to his feet. They faced each other. The madman laughed. He seemed unhurt, or if he was, his mad mind took no cognizance of it.

"Fight!" he roared. "A good fight. There will be much blood!"

And again he rushed.

Sutton side-stepped, swung a fist straight for the jutting jaw. It landed, and pain shot through his arm to the shoulder. The giant was unshaken, and whirling with incredible speed for his size, flung his arms about Sutton in a bear-hug.

Instantly Sutton felt his ribs cracking. He gasped for breath. Frantically he squirmed and fought and pounded with his fists against that grinning, bestial face, but the arms only constricted more. Whirling blackness swirled before his eyes.

Then the killer loosed his hold, snatched his shoulders in steel fingers; his teeth sought Sutton's throat.

A wave of horror swept over Sutton. He lunged backward, pulling the giant with him. They crashed to earth, and the giant's hold on his shoulders slipped. Once more they faced each other.

But all at once a blank look came over the madman's face, and at the same instant a sharp pistol shot whipped through the night air. The giant sagged slowly, then pitched to the earth, dead.

SUTTON turned dazedly to face Harland Lanier, who stood with a slight

smile that held no humor in it on his face, and in his hand a smoking revolver.

"I felt that it might be dangerous out here in the park," he said quietly, "so I came too, and brought my gun. You know, New York isn't a place of civilization any more . . ."

Sutton drew in a gasping breath.

"Did you have to kill him—that way?" he said.

Lanier looked at him queerly.

"He was trying to kill you, and judging from the way you look, he would have succeeded very well. Are you trying to say you'd have killed *him* . . .?"

Sutton shook his head.

"I don't know," he began. "But . . ."

Lanier laughed harshly.

"Forget I said anything. We're all a little unbalanced, I guess. And right now, that mixture of red and green blood on your shirt strikes me as just a little bit funny. My biological knowledge is so befuddled these days that *I'd believe you actually had green blood*—that *anybody* might have. Or orange, or violet, or indigo, or liquid gold— Say, what's the matter with you anyway, Allan? Why are you staring at me? I'm not crazy, just kidding . . ."

"I'm not thinking that," said Sutton slowly. "It's just that mention of red and green blood on my shirt. Red and *green* blood! Great Gods! Come on, Harland, we've got to get back to the lab, and Varrone. I've got an idea!"

"What sort of an idea?"

"Chlorophyll—and an autopsy. I've got to perform an autopsy!"

"An autopsy! On who . . .?"

But Allan Sutton was already running, headed back toward the towering bulk of Eugenic Laboratories, black before the setting moon on the edge of Central Park.

Lanier pocketed his gun, glanced once at the man he had killed, grunted, and followed.

CHAPTER III

Life from the Sun!

ALLAN SUTTON held the slide up to the light, peered at it intently for a long moment, then put it back into the microscope. Varrone and Lanier stood silently, puzzled and curious, at his side, waiting.

Sutton turned, motioned to Varrone to look at the slide. Varrone peered for a long moment.

"Very peculiar," he muttered. "Oddest sub-corpuscular formation I've ever seen. Just as if the molecules were broken—shattered, by something . . ."

"By a vibration," said Sutton quietly. "That's why our test tube baby didn't live. My autopsy proves it."

Lanier looked at him.

"You mean . . ."

"Hitler's ray! There's the answer, the reason for the sterility of women. Hitler's ray has shattered the cohesive structure of the chromosomes, and the hormones of life. The mysterious energy of life comes from the sun. That's where life was born, in the primeval seas, in the muddy ooze heated by sunlight.*

"It is this same energy that gives life to plants, most familiarly known to us as chlorophyll. This green substance contains the missing energy that has been short-circuited from the structure of life in women . . ."

*Scientists have long held that the first cosmic "accident" that caused life to spring into being here on Earth was the creation of a living, unicellular life-form in the sea, under the impulse of a peculiar vibration from the sun caused by the release of terrific energy—sufficient to destroy or create new carbon patterns. All life is composed of carbon-patterns, and the first pattern to take on sentience was most probably activated by sun-energy.—Ed.

Varrone gripped Sutton's arm excitedly.

"My boy, I think you're right. You've found it! Sun-energy is the answer. If we can re-create those original life-giving vibrations, we can 'shake' the chromosomes back into their original life-form. And human beings will again be born who will live and re-create, and evolve normally . . ."

Lanier interrupted.

"Very easy," he said wearily. "Just took Nature billions of years to *accidently* hit on exactly the right vibration to create carbon life-forms. Billions of chances *not* to hit on it. We haven't time for more than *one* trial, nor more than *one* opportunity to try it—Alice's baby!"

Varrone's face became sober, hopeless.

"You're right, Harland," he said. "But we'll have to take that one chance in billions. We'll go ahead . . ."

"We don't have to *chance* creating a carbon-life pattern," said Sutton calmly. "We've already *got* one."

Varrone stared, and Lanier's jaw dropped.

"Where?" asked Lanier bluntly.

"On my shirt," said Sutton.

"On your shirt?"

"Yes. Chlorophyll. Plant-carbon patterns. And since all carbon compounds are basically alike, they can be mixed. That's what we're going to do. We're going to rehabilitate Alice's baby's blood with liquid plant chlorophyll!"

"Son," said Varrone excitedly, "if you're right, you've saved the human race!"

Lanier took out a cigarette, lit it calmly, and puffed smoke into the air while the other two watched him. Then he grinned coldly.

"If," he said pointedly, "Alice's baby is a *girl.*"

IT WAS a week before the three biologists, weary and emotionally overwrought, succeeded in combining human blood and pure chlorophyll into a coagulation-free serum suitable for use in the incubator. Now, at last, all was in readiness. The incubator once more hummed with life, the Lindbergh mechanism beat out its human-heart rhythm, and tubes glowed with fairy-like colors as all the radiations necessary to the normal growth of an embryo were focused in the proper intensity. The result was artificial sunlight minus its destructive, burning quality.

"I don't think I have the strength nor the steadiness left to perform the operation," said Varrone. "I'm too tired, and my hand might slip. Lanier, I think you are best fitted to perform it."

Lanier nodded. "I can do it," he said briefly. "I can keep going for days yet, if necessary."

"I'm with you," said Sutton. "Let's get it over with. I've just talked to Alice, and she's ready."

"You told her she might not live through it?" asked Varrone.

"Yes. And she said she didn't care. If the baby lived, she'd be glad to die."

"Brave girl," said Varrone softly. "She was a war baby. New York never gave her a break. Seems rather ironic that she may be the one instrumental in saving that same city from the oblivion to which it cast her."

Lanier and Sutton prepared themselves for the operation, while Varrone went to get Alice. When he finally appeared, pushing the wan, pale, extremely youthful girl in a wheelchair, they were ready. Completely cloaked in sterilized garments, even to antiseptic helmets and goggles, they presented a rather startling appearance in the white, artificial-sunlight glare of the laboratory.

"Oh!" Alice uttered a little, fright-

ened scream, then bit her thin lip bravely.

"I didn't know you, Doctor Sutton," she finished. "You scared me—a little." She smiled tremulously.

"Don't be afraid," said Sutton. "You'll be all right."

There was a momentary awkward silence, while the three men fumbled for something else to say, and failed. It remained for the waif of the streets, hardly seventeen, to disperse the uncomfortableness that lay between them.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I'm glad! And somehow I know that my baby won't die. You said she wouldn't, Doctor Sutton, and I know you wouldn't lie to me. Doctor Varrone has told me that it is your discovery that will make her lovely, and strong, and healthy, just like all women used to be. You must be a very smart man, Doctor Sutton."

She smiled at them brightly.

"You are all such great men. It will be wonderful for my little girl to have you all for fathers. That's funny, isn't it? But I think it's nice. She'll be the luckiest girl that ever lived. And someday when she gets married . . ."

Abruptly she paused, and her eyes roved excitedly from one to the other of them.

"Oh!" she breathed. "One of you *can't* be a father to her; one of you'll have to *marry* her, and have lots of children . . ."

She studied Lanier for a moment, then, hesitantly, her eyes roved to Sutton. She peered up at him, head cocked, trying to see his eyes behind the goggles.

"I think you should marry her," she said simply. "You are the youngest, and I like you best, because you're like me, somehow. Not uppity, like a lot of people I've known . . . oh," she hastened to add, looking archly at Lanier, "I don't mean you're uppity, Doctor Lanier. It's just that you mightn't . . ." she hesitated, became confused.

"Yes, child," said Lanier softly. "I understand what you mean. You want your daughter to have the youngest man, and have the most children, so she will be a real Eve to the human race."

"Oh," she gasped. "You understand me too! Now I don't know . . ."

Varrone stepped forward.

"Come, child," he said. "Let's get ready."

For an instant her face went even whiter, then she looked up at Lanier.

"I'm ready," she said. "I'm not afraid at all. I know you won't hurt me now. You're kind and gentle, and you're not so old. Maybe my little girl will like you better. If she does, she can pick you."

She rose to her feet and walked falteringly toward the operating table. There was a beatific smile on her thin face. And a moment later, as Lanier picked up the scalpel, a choking sound came from behind his antiseptic mask.

THERE were tears in Henri Varrone's eyes as he pulled the sheet over the calm, still smiling face of the little seventeen-year-old waif of the streets.

"Not even the name of Jeanne d'Arc can outshine that of Alice of Manhattan," he whispered. "She was a real heroine. . . ."

Harland Lanier turned from where he stared bleakly out of the high window of the laboratory at the city below, revealed now in the bleakness of day. He looked at Varrone.

"I didn't hurt her," he said simply. "She never lost her smile."

"No, son," said Varrone. "You didn't hurt her."

Both men turned now to where Allan Sutton still labored desperately at the

incubator. As they watched, he stepped back with an exclamation.

"It's done!" he said. "The job's completed. Not even a filterable virus* could get into that incubator; and that Lindbergh mechanism would run for twenty years without attention, if it were necessary."

Under the soft orange light of the artificial sun-rays filling the interior of the incubator with a warm, bright glow, the newly transplanted embryo hung suspended in the green-cast liquid. It was a tiny thing, hard to discern through the thickness of glass and the colored serum itself. It was a small green blob of color, shapeless, indefinite.

Varrone stepped closer, peered at it.

"You've done a good job, Sutton."

"We've all done a good job," said Lanier. "I only wonder if it will all be in vain. If that embryo turns out to be a male—"

"We won't know for another month, or more," said Varrone.

"Maybe sooner than you expect," Sutton cut in. "I have a strong hunch that the growth of the embryo will be slightly faster than in a normal human being, because of an accelerating effect of the chlorophyll serum. It has a metabolic rate, normally, much higher than blood cells. This chloro-blood mixture might still possess something of plant metabolism."

As he finished speaking, there was silence for a moment. Then, beneath their feet, the building trembled slightly for an instant.

"What was that?" asked Varrone sharply.

Lanier looked puzzled.

"It couldn't have been an earthquake tremor. Yet, it felt oddly like one. I was in Shanghai once. . . ."

The windows of the laboratory thudded in their frames and shook as though a mighty blast of air had struck the building. Then, hard on the heels of the phenomenon, a growling, blasting roar came out of the distance.

"That was no earthquake!" exclaimed Sutton. "Something blew up —and from the sound of it, something really tremendous."

He sprang to the window and looked out.

"I don't see anything—" he began.

"Over here," came Lanier's quiet voice. "Out toward Brooklyn. Near the navy yard."

In an instant the three biologists stood before the laboratory window staring out over the city. Some ten or more miles away, a tremendous mushroom of black, oily smoke towered into the heavens, looming up ever higher as the force of the explosion that impelled it continued to drive it aloft.

"Great God," said Varrone, "that must have been something vital!"

They watched for long moments, while the tower of smoke spread out, then, strangely, began to descend, spreading slowly outward as it did so.

"Heavier than air!" Lanier burst out, incredulously. "That isn't ordinary smoke."

Varrone frowned.

"I never saw anything like that before," he muttered. "I'm not a physicist, but I know enough about chemistry to say that that smoke cloud is something ugly. And if I'm not wrong, it's going to be dangerous to those people over there."

"We'll know about it soon enough," Sutton said. "But I, for one, am willing to hear about it after I wake up. I'm

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* Filterable virus: medical science discovered early in the 1930's that some diseases were caused, not by a germ, but by a virus that was so penetrable in its power to pass through insulating materials, that no screen known to science could filter it out, or prevent its passing through a membrane. Thus it could not be isolated for study.—Ed.

dead tired, and I'm going to get that sleep we've put off for too long already."

"A good idea," Varrone said abstractly, his gaze still fixed lingeringly on the mysterious cloud pall on the horizon. "I second the motion. We've got some tests to make on that embryo in another twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER IV

An Unexpected Danger

"GET back!" the hoarse voice blasted through the murk of growing night. "That stuff's certain death!"

"Don't look like it to me," came another voice contemptuously. "Just a munition dump somebody forgot about. Got rotten with age, and blew, that's all . . ."

A big man loomed out of the mist, fists balled.

"I said get the hell outa here!" he snarled. "And I mean it. I'm gonna clear everybody outa here, and everybody means you too."

"Oh, yeah. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the boss of this section," the big man's voice was ugly. "The name's Matt Welch. Ever hear of it . . . ?" He paused significantly.

His challenger paused, looked at him a long instant.

"Sure," he drawled. "I heard of you. You're the big monkey who thinks he's going to set up a little dictatorship of his own here, and I think you're the guy who had something to do with that blow-up over there yesterday. Just to create a diversion so you can put in some strong-arm stuff and take over. Well, Mr. Matt Welch, I think I'm going to have a little to say, too, about who runs this show. Things has changed, but not for you, Welch . . ."

Matt Welch charged. Abruptly, forcibly, irresistibly. A Greek god would have envied the physique he hurled at his challenger. And as his great fist rocked the challenger to his heels, it was obvious to the men who appeared suddenly out of the mist, drawn by the fracas, that the newcomer had underestimated the man he had challenged.

And that underestimation was his death warrant.

He went down, stunned, and rolled desperately to escape the plunging body of Matt Welch. He regained his feet, recovered, and his hand leaped for his belt. He drew a gun.

Several of the advancing men hurled themselves forward, but too late.

Matt Welch had gripped the fellow's gun arm in one powerful hand, and now he bent it back.

"Stay back, fellows," he roared. "I can handle this mug myself!"

And he proceeded to "handle" the man in a rather horrible manner. There was a sharp crack, as a forearm bone broke; a shrill scream of male agony that was terrible to hear as Matt Welch then bent the body of his adversary over his big knee, slowly, delicately, yet with brutal force. There was a noise like a pistol shot, and the grim fight was over.

"Migawd," gasped one of the men who had halted in their forward rush to aid their chief, "broke 'im in half, like a rotten two-by-four!"

"And that's what'll happen to any other monkey who says I ain't boss of New York!" snapped Welch. "And now, get outa here, over onto the Island. When that black cloud gets here, it ain't gonna be healthy, hereabouts!"

IT was while they were walking briskly over Williamsburg Bridge that one of the men fell in beside Matt Welch.

"What's that stuff behind us, boss? That stuff that blew up and is spreading over the ground like black molasses

gas?"

"A new gas they never got around to using in the war," said Welch. "I warned 'em they'd better move it, because it'd get old and touchy and finally blow off like it did. But they were smarter'n me. They were chemists—I was only a top-sarge in the army. So it blew up."

"What'll it do to anybody caught by it?"

Matt Welch laughed grimly.

"Nothing much! It's just about the most deadly and horrible gas there ever was. It's some kind of coal-tar product, and it's in the benzol family. Doesn't do anything to the body, except maybe bleach out the skin a little, but one whiff of it, and bingo, you don't remember nothing anymore! Kills in a fraction of a second. You don't even have to breathe it. It goes right through the skin. And no gas mask can guard against something like that, even if there was a gas mask it wouldn't go through!"

"Whew! That's black dynamite, all right," breathed the man. "I'm staying as far away from it as possible." He turned and eyed the Brooklyn shore. "Think it'll cross the water?" he asked.

Welch shrugged.

"I don't know. I think it will. But it shouldn't get further than the Hudson's Jersey side. The Palisades will hold it back. And after awhile it'll be absorbed by the ground and lose its kick. Turn back to common coal tar."

They jogged on a while longer in silence, till they reached the Manhattan shore. Then the man who had spoken before asked another question.

"Where we going, boss?"

"I got plans," said Welch briefly. "There're a coupla guys over at Eugenics Laboratories I wanta see. They got something I want, maybe, if what I hear is right."

"You mean about them babies they're experimenting with?"

"No," said Welch. "I don't mean babies. It's got nothing to do with babies —yet. An' now, shut up. I got thinking to do. About fifty years of thinking. . . ."

"A MONTH'S growth in twenty-four hours!" Henri Varrone's voice held an incredulous note. "It doesn't sound possible, but it's happened. I don't know what it means. Something has gone wrong. . . ."

Harland Lanier's shout interrupted him.

"Henri—Allan—come quick! It's a girl!"

Varrone whirled from where he faced Sutton near a lab bench.

"What!" he gasped. "A girl you say!"

"Yes, look! And I'd say a perfectly normal development so far, even if it has been tremendously speeded up."

Allan Sutton nodded.

"Yes, Henri, I'm sure Harland is right. We needn't fear any great danger from this tremendously accelerated growth. It must inevitably slow down, and after she is born, and takes up a normal existence outside the incubator, development should resume a normal, or near-normal rate."

Varrone shook his head doubtfully, but there was hope in his eyes.

"You may be right, my boy, but while this process is going on, that embryo will grow like a plant. Apparently, thus far, the only plant characteristic is the rapid growth. The rest of the development is entirely normal, as we can all see."

"Fleur d'esperance," murmured Lanier softly. "Flower of hope!"

The door to the laboratory opened, and the three absorbed scientists failed to hear it, so intent were they in their

study of the embryo in the incubator.

Matt Welch came over behind them and stood silently for a long moment, his keen eyes taking in every detail of the huge laboratory, the incubator, and studying each one of the biologists closely. Finally he nodded in approval.

"I guess you guys know your business," he said. "Like I do mine."

The three whirled to face the intruder.

"What are you doing here, man?" asked Varrone sharply. "Don't you know this is an experimental laboratory, and very important experiments are being carried on. . . ."

"I know," said Welch. "Damned important. And I'm glad to see your department is being handled so efficiently."

"What do you mean 'your department'?" asked Lanier, frowning.

Welch shrugged, threw up his hands deprecatingly.

"I'm in charge of keeping order in the city," he said in an explanatory, easy tone. "There're only about fifty thousand people left in the burg now, and law and order has sort of gone to pieces. So that's where I come in. I've got things pretty well under control now. No more looting, destruction, disorganization. . . ."

"That's fine," Lanier said coldly. "Then maybe you'll see to it that we aren't molested here. Our work is of prime importance to the whole human race, not only to New York City."

"I know," said Welch. "But I'm afraid I gotta give you a few instructions first, before we all get outa here. . . ."

"Get out of here?" Varrone's question was almost an exclamation "What do you mean?"

"Take it easy, Doc," said Welch. "I ain't meaning nothing that hasn't got sense to it. All I wanta make sure is that that green baby you got in there is safe? She's mighty important to my future—to the future of all of us."

LANIER stepped forward.

"Just what are you driving at, Mr. . . ."

"Welch is the name," said their visitor. "Matt Welch. And here's the pitch. Say, for instance, you gotta leave here, for a month, two months, maybe five or six. Does this thing have to be tended?"

"That's none of your business," Lanier said quietly.

Welch frowned.

"It *is* my business," he said, a bit more sharply. "And I got my authority right with me. Come on in, boys." He waved a hand toward the door behind him. Several men, armed with business-like rifles and sub-machine guns, filed into the room and stood silently behind their leader.

"Now," Welch went on, "I'll explain why it's my business. I wanta know what I asked you, because if this thing isn't safe here, and won't run itself, we gotta move it to a place where it will be safe, and where you fellows can take care of it."

"Why?" asked Lanier, lips tight.

Welch grinned.

"Because yesterday—you musta heard it—a big government gas store house, left over from the war, exploded, and there's a cloud of the deadliest gas ever invented spreading slowly toward this building. In another day, it'll be here, and it'll be anywhere from a month to six months before any living thing can set foot in this area again. That's why. Is that reason good enough for you?"

Lanier's jaw went slack.

"My God!" he gasped.

Sutton came forward.

"You mean there's no way of guard-

ing against this gas?"

"I mean just that. No gas masks will do any good. It can't be dispersed, and it'll take a long while before it eventually neutralizes itself and turns back into the coal tar it came from. Then it'll be just like a black gum on the ground, and perfectly harmless."

"How do you know all this?" asked Lanier suspiciously. "Are you a chemist?"

"No. Just a top-sarge in the army—or I was before the peace was settled. But my old man was a chemist. He invented the gas. He told me it would become unstable with age, and I tried to tell the wise-guys who were keeping it stored, but they knew better. They're dead now, along with about ten thousand other people over in Brooklyn."

Varrone turned to Lanier.

"But we can't move the incubator," he protested. "It's impossible."

"We don't have to," Sutton said. "I'll run itself, and the gas can't touch the embryo. And if the gas will disperse, as Welch says it will, and become harmless, his time limit gives us plenty of leeway. Two months at the least. . . ."

"You mean it *can* be left in perfect safety?" asked Welch.

"I don't know," said Varrone helplessly. "At the present rate of accelerated growth. . . ."

"We've got to take a chance," said Lanier. "Even considering the rapid growth rate, which must slow down as the embryo becomes more complex, we couldn't do anything but let events take their course. The die was cast when we sealed the incubator. We'll come back the instant it is possible, and if anything has happened—well," Lanier shrugged, "we can charge it up to Fate, who seems to be dealing the cards right now."

"Say," Welch broke in. "You're a right guy, for a scientist. I think maybe I can use you in my setup, after this is all settled."

Lanier turned and stared at the big man.

"Maybe you can at that," he said levelly. "If you mean what you say about 'settling' things."

Welch grinned.

"I mean it all right," he said significantly. "And now, I think you fellows better see that everything is shipshape around here, lock everything up tight, and we'll be going. I think maybe Pittsburgh is gonna be our headquarters for a couple of months. I've got some of the boys straightening things out over there. . . ."

CHAPTER V

The Flower of Hope

MATT WELCH lowered the binoculars to his belt, returned them to the leather case.

"Pigeons," he said briefly. "They're walking on the ground. We can go back."

He turned and looked sharply over the men who stood at attention in a stiff line behind him.

"Captain Iverly," he barked. "Take command until I get back. And shoot any man who tries to cross the Hudson from the Jersey side. That island is strictly taboo."

"Right, sir," said Iverly, saluting smartly. "I'll shoot 'em, sir."

As Welch and the three biologists stepped into the boat, he grinned at them.

"Nice job of discipline, if I say so myself," he remarked. "Now if things have gone right over there, maybe we can save something out of this mess Hitler made for us."

Lanier stared at him steadily. In his eyes there was a strange flicker, as though he masked an inner opinion of Matt Welch.

"I've never seen a better job of handling men, or an ugly situation," he said. "In five months you've cleaned up the whole country west of Ohio and from New York to Atlanta. Especially that revolution in Pittsburgh. Even if you do say it yourself, I'll give you my honest respect for a good job."

Welch peered at him, a peculiar, calculating look on his face.

"Mister," he said. "Are you kidding me?"

Lanier smiled a little.

"If I am," he said quietly, "I'm doing a good job of it, if I do say it myself. . . ."

Silence fell over the four men now, and the only sound was the lapping of the waves and the muffled purr of the marine motor of the sleek launch. Once in a while there was the thud of a floating cake of ice against the hull. It was still early March, and there was ice in the river.

Sutton and Varrone scanned the black shore of the Island.

"Ugly looking stuff," said Sutton, "but the pigeons are walking over it, all right. It's been completely neutralized."

Varrone looked anxiously at the Eugenics Laboratories tower looming up ahead of them, its ninety-story spire etching the sky like a fire-blackened needle with its tip rubbed clean of soot.

"Even if the gas entered the laboratory," he said, "it wasn't in any great concentration at that height. The precipitate extends barely to the fiftieth story."

"Might not have even gotten up to the lab," remarked Welch. "The stuff, if I remember rightly, was plenty heavy. Stayed down under two hundred feet most of the time."

The boat slowed now, as Welch guided it in toward the slip where once great liners like the *Normandie* had docked. The Swedish-American Line Piers were there, to the north, and Sutton threw a rope over a mooring post and made fast.

Then he helped Varrone up onto the dock. The quartet stood there a moment, surveying the oddly blackened city before them a moment.

"Come on," said Lanier then, "the sooner I get to the lab the better I'll feel. I'm on pins and needles."

As they hurried through the city, Matt Welch remarked:

"Mighty good thing the war ended when it did. If they'd used this stuff, there wouldn't even be any *men* alive today! If I've ever seen a graveyard, its this city right now. Except for them pigeons. . . ."

THE elevators in the tower were not working. Lanier grunted.

"Good thing we got all that exercise marching around the country, attending executions, and running from bandits. We're going to need our legs to walk up those seventy stories."

A half-hour later, panting and dry-lipped, they stood before the laboratory door, waiting while Sutton fumbled with the key with a hand that trembled.

"I feel funny," whispered Welch, running a finger around the collar of his army shirt. "Thinking of that baby in there, about ready to be born—if nothing's happened to it—sort of gets me. I don't go for this kind of thing. I'd rather be in a good fight any day. . . ."

The door swung open, and his voice died away. The four of them walked into the darkened interior, then halted. Before them was the warm orange glow from the incubator, like the living coals in a furnace. The soft, even hum of smoothly functioning machinery met their ears.

"Still running, as though we'd never left it!" exclaimed Sutton eagerly.

But Matt Welch's goggling eyes weren't on the mechanical marvels of this hall of wonders. He was staring at the incubator itself, at the figure that floated limply in the bottom of it.

"That ain't no baby in there!" he gasped. "If that ain't a grown woman, I'll eat my hat!"

Lanier and Sutton leaped forward, followed by Varrone, who now forgot the fatigue caused by the long walk up the stairs.

It was quite obvious to them all that Matt Welch would not have to eat his hat.

Inside the glass casing of the incubator floated a perfectly formed female body. It was that of a girl of apparently sixteen or seventeen, insofar as physical development was concerned. Her long, coal-black hair streamed slowly about in the chloro-serum. Her face was beautiful, and her eyes were closed, features placid, unmoving, un-alive.

"The accelerated growth," said Varrone in alarm, "it didn't slow down!"

Lanier's face was grey with disappointment.

"We're too late, by far," he said bitterly. "She's probably been dead for three months. Perfectly preserved, of course, in that serum. . . ."

"Not 'of course!'" said Sutton excitedly. "She wouldn't be perfectly preserved at all. Under that light, putrefaction would have set in almost immediately. She's in perfect condition—and look!—*she's moving!*"

One of the slim legs flexed slightly, exactly as that other embryo had, six months before.

Henri Varrone sat down on a chair, a strange look on his face.

"I don't understand how," he whispered, "but there it is. She's alive, and apparently developed to the stage, still in an embryonic environment, of a sixteen-year-old girl! By all the laws of nature she should have been walking and breathing now. Or she should be dead. But she's neither!"

Lanier frowned.

"Just what are we going to do about it?" he asked. "Should we take her out now and try to live normally, or—?"

Varrone looked at him, an incredulous light flooding his face.

"Are you trying to say . . ."

"Why not?" interrupted Sutton excitedly. "Another month in the incubator and she'll be a mature woman. A *mature* woman, do you hear!"

"It's fantastic," breathed Varrone. "In all my years, I've never dreamed of anything so biologically impossible as this. A full-grown human being, in less than seven months altogether. Twenty years, crowded into seven months. . . ."

He stopped speaking as Matt Welch advanced slowly, an expression on his face none of them had ever seen there before. He went up to the incubator, close to the glass, and peered inside in fascination.

"A full-grown woman," he muttered, "twenty years old—and there's nothing the matter with her!"

HE WHIRLED to Varrone.

"Is that right?" he asked hoarsely. "Is she okay? She won't be like all the other women were, after Hitler got through with his damned rays?"

"We don't know that yet," snapped Lanier. He was staring at Matt Welch through narrowed eyelids. "We won't know it for awhile—even if she lives after we take her out of there."

Varrone was on his feet, seemingly oblivious of the question put to him. He was debating mentally on some problem.

"Got to get her head down," he said "She's in the wrong position utterly. In order to properly circulate the blood . . . I wonder!"

"Wonder what?" asked Sutton, his interest adding fire to that of Henri Varrone's. He stepped up beside the older biologist.

"Get out the cardio-meter," snapped Varrone. "We've got some experiments to make."

Lanier and Sutton leaped to obey, and for the next hour Matt Welch was forgotten. He remained in the background, watching with a strange mixture of fascination and studied calculation as the three men set up the cardiometer, and the calculating look in his eyes grew as through the laboratory boomed the greatly magnified sound of a human heart, beating steadily, strongly.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud. Thud-thud-thud. Thud.

"Yes," said Varrone. "We've got to suspend her in an inverted position. That heart-beat must be made regular. Her circulation is impaired."

For a few more moments Matt Welch watched, then he turned to the door.

"I'm going down to rustle some grub," he said. "You fellows are going to have your work cut out for you. I'll play cook."

Lanier threw him a hasty glance.

"Good idea," he agreed. "We'll be here hours yet. In fact," he decided "we're staying here for the next month. Better arrange to move some of your men over here and camp in the building. We may need help."

Matt Welch nodded and went out.

There was a new gleam in his eyes that grew stronger as he clumped down the interminable stairs.

"That guy *knows* she's gonna be okay," he said aloud. "He's a sharp one, all right, but not as sharp as Matt Welch. I gotta do some more thinking now— and it ain't fifty years in the future this time. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

The Chlorophyll Girl

"TODAY will go down in Man's history, either as the greatest moment in all history, or as the blackest."

Henri Varrone put the greatly enlarged micro-photograph down and turned to face his two colleagues.

"This blood-cell photograph shows a perfectly normal structure; the shattered condition induced by Hitler's ray being entirely absent. She's normal, healthy, and fully mature. When we take her out of the incubator in a few minutes, Man's future will be decided. Either he goes on populating the globe, or this world becomes a dead planet, unpeopled by intelligent mammals."

"Let's get it over with," said Lanier hoarsely. "If we don't get her out of that damned thing soon, I'll . . ."

"Yes," said Varrone quietly. "Let's get it over with."

They set to work, and in a matter of minutes they were ready to shut down the faithfully purring Lindbergh mechanism. One by one the three of them shut down the various valves. As Varrone pulled the master switch, complete mechanical silence settled on the laboratory.

Lanier mounted his ladder, hastily unscrewed the bolts that held the cover of the incubator in place, and then pushed it aside. Plunging his arms into the chlorophyll liquid, he loosened the silver cables attached to the girl's feet and wrists, which had held her suspended head down in the glass interior. Then catching one hand, he lifted the still form, shining wetly green in the daylight, and arms under hers, lifted

her out and carried her down the ladder.

"Quick!" exclaimed Varrone.

Lanier laid her down, took the loose cable still attached to her feet, slung it into the pulley provided for the purpose, and hauled the slim green form aloft until it swung free of the floor.

"Sub-microelectric radiations!" Varrone commanded.

Sutton was ready, and the invisible rays bathed the green body for perhaps half a minute.

"That should do it," he said.

"Stimulus!" barked Varrone.

Lanier hesitated a brief second, and he reddened. Then, lips tight, he stepped forward. The sound of a palm meeting bare flesh echoed sharply through the laboratory. Once, twice, three times it came.

The suspended girl gave a slight gasp, then went silent again.

"More!" said Varrone sharply.

Lanier, his face red to his neck and his ears burning, applied himself to his task again.

This time his efforts were rewarded. The slim green form writhed violently on its silver chain, and abruptly an outraged feminine cry keened through the laboratory. It was not the cry of a baby, but the protesting scream of a woman who had been spanked.

"Let her down!" commanded Varrone, dancing about excitedly. "Good Lord, but she's mad! Let her down!"

LANIER, his hand still stinging, loosened the metal cable, grasped the girl's gasping form in one arm, and let the chain rattle through the pulley. Then, still holding the girl tightly, he snapped off the cuffs that held the chain to her ankles.

Then, with difficulty because the burden in his arms was squirming so, he turned the girl right side up, and set her on her feet. Promptly she sat down on the floor, hard, and another surprised cry came from her lips. Then, as her eyes, open wide now revealing glowing green pupils, met the daylight, she stopped with a choked sob, whimpered once or twice, and sat motionless, her gaze fixed on the source of light, unwaveringly, uncomprehendingly. She would have keeled over if Lanier hadn't dropped to one knee beside her and put an arm about her shoulder.

Reflexively, her head turned sharply around, and her eyes stared at his face, but they looked beyond. They focused on nothing.

"She's as helpless as a baby," said Lanier huskily. "She can't even control her eyes."

Varrone knelt too, felt her pulse.

"Yes. She'll have to learn to do everything, just as a baby does. But I think she'll learn much faster. In a few months we should have her learning to talk. She's strong, and apparently healthy. She'll be learning to use her feet in a few days."

But the slim, girlish figure lay quietly in Lanier's arms now. Her head lolled back, and her eyes remained staring, the first green glow that had been in them almost faded away. All at once she drew her knees up and her arms folded around them. Her head dropped on her knees and she was quiet.

"Reflexive embryonic reaction."* observed Varrone hesitantly.

*Many people, even adults, like to "curl up" and assume the position of the embryo before birth. This is a natural tendency of some people while asleep. In this case, the green girl is responding to an instinctive, hereditary reaction that is partly human, partly plantlike. She is assuming both the embryonic position, and imitating the closing of the petals of a flower, demonstrating that some strange hereditary effect derived from the plant world may be a factor of the hormones in chlorophyll as well as it seems to be in the hormones of human beings. This is an interesting question, and scientists may discover that there is a curious relationship between human, animal life, and the plant world.—Ed.

Lanier looked up sharply, detecting the hesitancy in the older biologist's tones.

"Something wrong?" he asked quickly.

Varrone shook his head slowly. Then his eyes went to the window. Outside, it was snowing. A spring snowstorm had begun. Inside the laboratory it became almost dark, gloomy.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "It's natural that she wouldn't respond right now. You noticed how she faced the light at first; it's dimmed now. I *think* she's all right. . . ."

MATT WELCH stepped out of the side corridor into which he had darted a moment before. He looked at Harland Lanier's broad back vanishing down the stairway at the end of the hall, then he grinned.

"Now," he whispered, "we'll have a look at what's in that laboratory they claim is so delicate it mustn't be disturbed."

He quickly opened the laboratory door, stepped inside, and closed it. He stared around.

"Empty," he said. "What the hell is this?"

He walked swiftly across the huge laboratory, his footsteps echoing on the floor. He entered a smaller room beyond, then stopped in his tracks.

Seated in an easy chair, facing him, was the green girl. Her eyes were wide open, staring, fixed on him. Her face was wan, emotionless, a pale, whitish green. In the gloomy light of the cloud-wrapped day, she seemed almost corpse-like. She was clad in a simple gown that scarcely hid the curves of her body. Through it Welch could see that she was scrawny, thin, and bony.

"Hell!" he burst out. "They ain't feeding you right, sister!" He stopped, staring at her eyes. They seemed to look through him, beyond him.

"Hello," he said tentatively, a little less emphatic. "Hello, can't you talk?" He stepped forward slowly, frowned. He swallowed hard.

"Hello," he repeated in a louder tone. He waved a hand before her eyes, then he backed away.

"What's the matter with her?" he growled. Suddenly his jaw hardened. "Them damned biologists. They ain't so smart after all. They sure ain't taking care of her right . . . I'll see about this, or my name ain't Matt Welch . . ."

He halted abruptly, staring at the girl. The sun had just broken through the clouds and brilliant light streamed into the room. Almost like magic the former gloom of the place vanished, to be replaced by a springy warmth that made Welch blink. He fixed his eyes in wonder on the girl, who was moving now.

Her head turned, quick and darting, almost as though her neck muscles were uncontrolled. She faced the sunlight. Her pale eyes began to glow. She lurched erect, would have fallen if Welch hadn't leaped forward and caught her.

"Take it easy baby," he warned. "You ain't very strong yet."

She squirmed in his grasp.

"What's the matter, sugar?" he asked, puzzledly. "What's the fuss about?" Then his eyes widened. "Oh, I get it. You want to get over into the sunshine. Yeah, that's the idea, baby. You need sunshine and lots of it. Get rid of that damned green stuff on your skin. Get a little healthy tan—"

He led her stumbling, erratic footsteps over toward the window that opened on a veranda. He threw it open. It was a tall window that reached from the floor almost to the high ceiling. Brilliant sunlight lanced down, fell across the whole room.

The girl uttered a little gurgle of delight, spread her arms toward the sunshine, leaned forward, face uplifted.

"Sure, baby," said Welch, leading her out onto the balcony, which was warm with the breath of spring. "Sure . . . let's get a little sun bath. Do you good."

THE girl stood erect, swaying slightly, and Welch released her and stepped back cautiously.

"Say," he said admiringly. "You ain't a bad looker. A couple more pounds, and a little color, and you'll be a knockout. I think we're going to get along all ri . . ."

"Welch!" came a harsh voice behind him. "What's going on here?"

Matt Welch whirled to face Harland Lanier, who stood in the doorway of the room, eyes blazing in anger.

"Didn't I tell you to keep out of here?" Lanier grated. "Do you want to ruin everything?"

Welch grinned.

"Ruin everything? Me? *You* don't look so efficient to me. Take a look at that girl *now!* You guys ain't got sense enough to see she needs a little sunshine and good food and building up. She's as skinny as a rail. And I guess I can see, too, what you mean by 'ruining' everything. I'm onto your little game, Lanier. She's hot stuff, Mister. Yessir, I can sure see why . . ."

Face flaming in rage, Lanier leaped forward, his fists clenched. Welch braced himself, his fists closed, and he grinned.

But behind him the green girl turned, and luminous eyes fixed on Lanier's face. She smiled brightly.

"Hello," she said. "Hello, Hello."

Stunned, Lanier stopped in his tracks. Welch dropped his fists and turned to look at the girl. At her feet lay her discarded gown, and the sunlight gleamed brightly on her pale green skin.

"So you *can* talk . . . and *act,*" Welch said admiringly. "Hello, baby, again, and pleased to meet you!"

"Hello," she repeated, parrotlike, and her joyous smile grew. Her eyes remained fixed on Lanier's face. "Pleased to meet you . . . hello, baby!"

CHAPTER VII

"Like a Flower Blossoming . . ."

"IT'S uncanny," said Lanier. "You should have seen her there in the sunlight, reaching out like a flower toward the sun, shedding her clothes so that her whole body might drink in the rays. She almost seemed to grow as I watched her; seemed to fill out those hollows in her cheeks where she'd lost weight. She *drank* up that sunlight like a sponge, I tell you. . . ."

"Like a flower blossoming," said Varrone seriously.

"That's it!" said Harland Lanier. "I'll swear her hair -you know how inky black it was—began to brighten as I watched it. Today her hair is as gold as the metal itself—and as shiny. It's the loveliest sun-gold colored hair any girl ever had; and her skin . . . a creamy light green, traced through everywhere by the darker green of her veins and arteries, showing through the skin like the traceries in a fresh, green leaf.

"And talk! Why she repeats everything she hears, and remembers it too! She looks at you with those glowing green eyes of hers and recites everything she's ever heard. She still doesn't know what the words mean, but sometimes she gets out something intelligible. Especially 'hello'. She knows what that means, and she chatters it like a monkey every time I come into the room."

"Harland," Varrone interrupted him. "I'm worried."

Lanier gaped at the older man.

"Worried? What about?"

"About . . . her."

"You haven't got a thing to worry about," scoffed Lanier. "Sutton and I have given her every test known to medicine and biology, and she's perfectly normal and healthy in every human aspect. And her plant nature hasn't done anything except give her some rather startling floral characteristics. That hair-changing stunt, for instance. She changes colors like a blossoming flower. And she reaches out to the sun like the head of a daisy. But that's nothing to worry about. It adds to her beauty, which is quite striking."

"I hope you're right," said Varrone dubiously. "Somehow, I have a feeling that this strange mixture of flora and fauna bears some aspects that aren't quite evident as yet. I'll have to wait till later in the season to know. Perhaps with the coming of Fall . . ."

Lanier frowned.

"What's Fall got to do with it?"

"Maybe nothing," Varrone answered. "I hope not."

Lanier laughed and clapped the older man on the back.

"Now that we've actually succeeded in creating a biologically normal woman, you haven't got anything to worry about, so you proceed to imagine things."

Varrone nodded.

"Maybe I do. But now, I've got some slides to examine, and I think you and Allan have some school work to attend to. You've got to educate our chlorophyll girl, you know."

With that he hurried back to the laboratory.

LANIER looked after him a moment, then turned and opened the door to the quarters where the green girl had been made comfortable. As he entered, he heard her laugh pealing out.

Her arms were tightly around Allan Sutton's neck, and she was laughing delightedly, her head thrown back, her golden hair streaming down behind her like a waterfall of sunlight.

Sutton's face was red, and he struggled to disengage her arms from him. He succeeded just as he saw Lanier enter.

"Good Lord!" he burst out. "She's like a clinging vine. She nearly strangled me to death."

Lanier grinned.

"From the way she's laughing, I'd say she thought it was a good idea. Good thing for you she hasn't got any thorns."

"Oh hasn't she?" Sutton replied ruefully. "She's got the sharpest fingernails I've ever run across! If she's like any flower at all, I'd say it was the tiger-lily."

"By the way," Lanier said casually, trying to keep his eyes away from the girl, who had stopped laughing now and was staring intently at him, "your mention of a flower reminds me we haven't given her a name yet. What'll we call her?"

Sutton looked thoughtful.

"How about Flora?" he suggested. "Flora and fauna, you know."

"No," Lanier shook his head. "Sounds like a cigar."

"Rose, Lily, Daisy . . ."

"*Le fleur*," Lanier went on. "The flower. Ah! I've got it! We'll call her Fleurette."

"Hey, that sounds okay to me," Sutton said enthusiastically. "Fleurette it is." He turned to the girl, seemed about to address her by her new name, then stopped as he saw the intentness with which her gaze was centered on

Lanier.

"Hello," she said suddenly. "Hello, Harland Lanier!"

Lanier's jaw dropped for an instant, and his eyes went wide. Then, he swallowed hastily, recovered his composure and answered.

"Hello, Fleurette," he said. "I hardly expected that from you, yet."

"Hardly expected," she agreed brightly. "The sun is beautiful, isn't it?"

Allan Sutton scratched his head.

"It's amazing how fast she learns," he said. "I said that to her just before you came in, and that's when she threw her arms around my neck: Now she's repeating it, and getting close to the proper place to use it. Like your name. I told her that too, but for the life of me, I don't know how she understood *who* I was talking about."

"Maybe being part plant has something to do with it," suggested Lanier. "You know how fast a flower grows and develops in a short season."

Sutton shot a startled glance at Lanier.

"Maybe Varrone's got something there at that," he said with a new thoughtful seriousness.

"Say," Lanier stared at him. "What's this all about anyway? What are you two muttering about? Both of you sound like a couple of Calamity Janes!"

Sutton shrugged.

"Personally I don't think there's anything to worry about, but Varrone seems to think she's too much like a plant."

"He told me that too, but I don't see it. If you ask me," Lanier went on drily, "she was reacting quite emphatically like a human being and not a plant, when I came in here."

Sutton reddened.

"I didn't give her any encouragement . . ." he began.

"She catches on quick, though," Lanier said. Then, noticing the gathering frown in Sutton's eyes, he laughed. "Take it easy, Allan. I don't mean anything. Maybe I'm just a little bit jealous. She sure had you in a nice spot . . . for you!"

Sutton grinned sheepishly.

"Yeah," he admitted. "It was kind of nice!"

CHAPTER VIII

Fleurette—Woman or Plant?

"ONLY two months, and it seems I've lived many years already," the girl said, looking straight into the setting sun which painted its red and gold glories on the western sky and reflected them on the city stretched out below. "It's all been so wonderful to me. And at the same time, it's been so frightening."

"Frightening?" Lanier looked at her, his eyes devouring the flaming beauty of her golden hair, her rich, creamy, pale greenish skin glowing like living moonlight. In the two months of summer, she had grown strikingly beautiful. Each day had seemed to add to her beauty, until now, with the near approach of Fall, she had attained a peak of perfection that reminded Lanier of the full, robust, yet delicate beauty of a shining poplar tree, or a slim, white birch. "Frightening?" he repeated. "Why do you say that?"

She stared speculatively at the setting sun, watching its red half-disc vanishing beyond the hills off to the western skyline.

"Because I'm not like other people—like you, for instance. I sense a strange difference, and it perturbs me. Sometimes I wonder—and I'm afraid."

"You've got nothing to be afraid of,"

Lanier said. "Unless it's Matt Welch. Has he been bothering you again? If he has, I'll break his . . ."

"No," she said swiftly. "He hasn't been bothering me. I'm not afraid of him. It's something else . . . the duty that faces me. I'm afraid you and Allan and Henri are staking too much on me. The whole human race—"

"You're all we have to stake *anything* on," he said. "You're the only normal woman in the whole world . . ."

"Normal *woman,*" she said, with peculiar emphasis on the word.

His brow furrowed.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

She shrugged a bit, and it seemed somehow like the upspringing of a leaf that has just been relieved of the burden of a clinging drop of water. So many of her motions were like dancing leaves, swaying boughs, nodding flowers . . .

"You yourself named me Fleurette," she said. "And I feel that it fits me well. Perhaps too well. Maybe I *am* a flower."

"The most beautiful one in the world," he said, then laughed. "If you aren't a normal, healthy, completely womanly woman, then I'm not a biologist. By every test, you are one-hundred percent human. And looking like a flower only adds to your charm. Your hair, for instance; first it was pitch black, then it turned bright gold with the summer sun, and now, with the coming of Fall, I'll swear it is turning red! Red like the leaves of an oak touched by the frost . . ."

"Don't!" she said in sudden terror. *"Don't say that!"*

HE BECAME still, aghast. But only for a moment. He took her hand in his and sought to stop its trembling.

"Fleurette . . . I . . ." he fumbled, " . . . I'm sorry to frighten you. I didn't realize that you *were* frightened. But what is it? Tell me I'm sure that whatever it is must be something silly that I can explain away in a minute, just like I've explained everything else to you."

The sun had dropped behind the hill by this time, and the deep purple of night was sweeping swiftly over the city. Now that no lights were in that city below, it seemed not to exist at night, when there was no moon. It just faded out, became one with the wilderness that was New Jersey.

Her eyes were fixed on the blackness, and she seemed unaware for the moment of his words, or of her hand in his. It was a limp, cool, unmoving. He squeezed it a bit, but there was no response.

"Fleurette," he repeated gently. "What's wrong?"

She stirred.

"Oh, nothing," she said distantly. "I think it must be just my imagination. But Henry did say I was a plant—when Allan talked to him about me."

"About you?"

"Yes . . ." her response trailed off, and he couldn't catch it.

"Do you like him?" he asked.

"Oh yes, very much. He's nice."

Once more her voice trailed off. For a moment he was silent, a swirl of emotions sweeping through him, then he gripped her shoulders, turned her around so that she faced him.

"Fleurette," he said huskily. "I can't hold it back any longer. I've got to say it. We're here under very strange circumstances. Neither of us, you especially, have self to think of. We're not important, as individual people. You are vastly important, as humanity itself. And I don't amount to much. But there's one thing I do

know . . .

"I love you, Fleurette."

Her deep green eyes seemed staring into his, but they were vague and far away. They seemed to look through him. And she seemed not to have heard him.

"Fleurette," he repeated softly. "Are you listening to what I'm saying? I love you, do you understand, and I want you to be my wife."

She swayed slightly, like a bough in the wind, toward him, and he drew her into his arms. He pressed his lips against hers hungrily, tightly. Then abruptly he drew erect and visible even in the night, his face went pale.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Fleurette," he said after a moment, in which he fought for control. "I thought . . ."

Then he turned and went in. And behind him, the girl stood silently, her arms folded about her slim shoulders, and her head bowed. She seemed oddly like a sleeping flower, with its petals closed for the night.

Lanier walked down the long hallway toward his room, his emotions frozen inside him.

"Cold!" he whispered tensely. "Her lips might have been ice, for all the response she gave me. She couldn't have given me a better answer. It's Allan she loves, not me."

At the door of his room he stopped, and a dry grin came to his face.

"Just like me," he said, "to wait till there's only one woman left in the world to fall in love!"

HENRI Varrone and Allan Sutton faced each other in the laboratory, which was weirdly lit with the red glow of the autumn sunrise.

"The implications are almost too obvious," said Varrone heavily. "I have been trying hard to reason a way around them for months, but I'm beginning to feel that my suspicions are right."

Sutton's face was pale.

"Like last night," he agreed. "I found her out on the balcony, in the dark. She was kneeling there, arms folded, head down, just like she did that day when we took her out of the incubator, before spring came and changed her hair to gold, and made her live like a beautiful flower.

"The flowers in the balcony flower boxes were what brought it home to me most strongly. They were drooping too, in almost exactly the same posture. Bowed for the night, waiting for the sunlight of the next day.

"I tried to rouse her, but she simply wouldn't respond."

"Yes, Allan, that's exactly it," agreed Varrone. "She's more and more like a flower each day. No response at night, vivacious and beautiful during the day. And she changes with the seasons."

Sutton was quiet a moment, his eyes bearing a thoughtful look that brought tiny wrinkles of concern to his eyes.

"Poor Harland," he muttered. "What a slap in the face it must have been to him, and he doesn't even suspect . . ."

"Eh?" asked Varrone. "What are you saying?"

Sutton looked up, startled.

"Was I thinking out loud? I didn't mean to."

"What's all this about 'poor Harland'?"

"He's in love with her," said Sutton quietly.

"In love with her! How do you know?"

"I saw them on the balcony last night, and I couldn't help hearing him ask her to marry him. I'd been on my way to find her, to see that she came in for the night."

"She knelt there like a flower after sundown, arms folded, unresponsive"

"Well," asked Varrone impatiently. "What happened?"

"She didn't respond, plantlike, and he asked her again. She swayed against him, and he thought she wanted to be kissed, so he did . . ."

"And?"

Sutton shrugged.

"She was cold as ice, of course. Maybe never even knew she was being kissed. And he thought it was because she was turning him down. He looked like a whipped puppy when he walked away. And when he had gone, she knelt down like I was just telling you."

Varrone frowned.

"It's too bad," he said. "I'm sorry it has to pan out this way."

"She loves him, too," said Sutton. "From the very beginning when she said 'hello,' her first word, it was to him. It was his name she remembered first. And when he comes in, it's just like when she steps into the sunlight; she lights up and smiles with every inch of her."

"We mustn't tell him," said Varrone.

Sutton frowned.

"Why not?"

"Because, lad, I'm sure now, that I'm right. She's a plant!"

"A plant?"

"Yes."

"You mean . . ."

"It's the end for man," said Varrone bitterly. "She was woman's last hope, and she's a plant! A plant, do you hear? When snow falls, she will die — and mankind will die. We've failed to create a new Eve. And that's why we can't tell Harland. It's better that he thinks she doesn't love him . . ."

A slight noise halted him.

Outside the doorway a slim form stood against the wall, one hand pressed against her heart.

"Yes," she was whispering to herself, "it's better that he thinks I don't love . . ."

"Girl," said Varrone, coming out into the hallway and taking her arm gently, "what are you whispering about? How long have you been here? Did you hear what we were saying?"

CHAPTER IX

"It's Because We're Different!"

"I DIDN'T believe Henri was right in not telling you," said Sutton. "I couldn't keep on concealing the truth from you and cheating you of the little happiness you might have. After all, we're all done now, and if there's anything bright left in the world, there's no use letting it perish without a chance to shine for a time . . ."

Harland Lanier stared at his fellow-biologist.

"You mean that she's a plant, as truly as any flower, and that she will fade and die when the snow comes—like any flower?"

"That's the simple truth," said Sutton sadly. "The chlorophyll has so changed her that the human life span means nothing. She has the life span of a flower, growing with the spring, flowering with the summer, withering with the frost, and dying with the snowfall. She's really a plant, Harland. You've noticed her hair today: it's not gold, any more, it's red, and brown, and yellow—just like the leaves in the Fall. If we needed more proof, that would be it."

"Allan," said Lanier huskily, "you're the finest man I ever knew, and the best friend. But it's no go. She doesn't love me. Even knowing she's going to die, I can't snatch at a last few moments of happiness. She doesn't want me. It's you she loves, if you'd admit it."

"I got my answer in the *daylight!*" said Sutton. "No, old man, it's you she loves, and my advice is for you to go to her and have another try at it."

He clapped Lanier on the shoulder, grinned, and walked away, but as he went, the smile faded, and he swallowed hard.

Lanier stood looking after him, a puzzled look on his face.

"Got his answer in the daylight?" he said wonderingly. "What did he mean by that?"

His eyes widened.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. *"That's* it! She *is* a plant. Naturally her responses were negative in the dark. She was asleep! Really asleep, like a flower in the night."

He started on the run down the hallway, then came to a stop.

"You fool!" he whispered to himself. "She *is* a plant. You're a human being. Even the sorriest biologist of them all would have sense enough to realize she couldn't love you. She's different; a plant. It's because we're different, that she acted that way when I asked her to marry me. *That's* why she didn't respond."

He walked aimlessly out onto the balcony. He stared over the city, becoming bleak now with the approach of Fall. Leaves were falling everywhere in Central Park. His fingers toyed idly with a withered flower stalk in a flower box on the rail. He drew his hand back with a sharp exclamation as a thorn penetrated his skin.

A drop of blood appeared on one finger, and he looked at it.

"She's a plant," he repeated, then with growing excitement, "because of the chloro-blood in her veins. The hormones of chlorophyll! That's *why* she's different. Otherwise, we are still man and woman. I've *got* it . . ."

He whirled, raced from the balcony and into the laboratory.

HENRI VARRONE paused at the door of the laboratory and looked at the streak of light coming from beneath it.

"Still working," he mused. "What is the boy up to?"

He opened the door, peered in. Then his brow wrinkled in puzzlement, and he entered, closed the door softly behind him. He walked slowly forward to where Harland Lanier sat in a chair beside a laboratory bench, surrounded by complicated apparatus. He was sitting there tensely, one hand gripping the arm of the chair so tightly his knuckles gleamed whitely in the light. He was sweating profusely, and his breath came in gasps through tight lips. His other arm Varrone could not see, but he did see the glass jar of brilliant green liquid beside the chair in which Lanier sat.

"Chlorophyll!" he exclaimed. "What *are* you doing, lad?"

He advanced, confronted the startled Lanier, looked at the bared arm, the tiny rubber hoses that led from the chlorophyll tank to transfusion needles imbedded in Lanier's veins. Through glass tubes he could see the red blood that was Lanier's coursing, to mingle with the chlorophyll to a fixed degree and circle once more to return to the body from which it came.

"Are you trying to kill yourself!" he asked harshly. "Here, turn that infernal machine off . . ."

"No!" Lanier half rose from his seat, then sank back weakly. "No, Henri, don't stop it. I'm doing what I want to do."

"This might prove fatal!" exclaimed Varrone protestingly. "What on earth is your purpose in such a crazy experiment?"

"Sutton told me about Fleurette this morning," said Lanier, his face shining with sweat in the laboratory light. "You should have told me before this. She's a plant, and I've decided to become like her. She won't respond to me as I am, so, even if it does mean we will both die when the snow falls, it doesn't make much difference. I think I have the right to snatch at the few brief moments of happiness I can get this way . . ."

Henri Varrone's face took on a stricken look for an instant.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said. "I didn't realize . . ."

"Henri," interrupted Lanier in a whisper. "I'm getting very dizzy. I think I'll . . . pass out . . . in a minute or . . . so. Finish this business up for me . . . promise . . . even if it kills . . . "

He reeled, and Varrone leaped forward, pushed him back in the seat, held him steady. Lanier had fainted.

Varrone's scientific eye glanced at the many recording meters critically, and in a moment his face took on a professional look of interest. He felt Lanier's pulse and nodded.

"No matter what the outcome, he

certainly is doing a good job of it," he muttered. "Sure, lad, I'll finish up for you. But you're going to be a mighty sick biologist for awhile. Mighty sick!"

CHAPTER X

Matt Welch Kidnaps a Queen

THE acrid smell of wood smoke was in the crisp morning air. Matt Welch stood on the bank of the Hudson, leaning on his rifle, staring across toward Manhattan.

He looked down to where the boat was being readied.

"Captain Iverly!" he barked.

"Yes, sir," came the voice of the captain from below him.

"Don't forget those tear-gas bombs. That'll be about all we'll really need. We'll smoke 'em out, tie 'em up, and be away before they know what it's all about."

"I've got them loaded, sir," said Iverly. "Two whole cases. That's about all we'll be able to carry."

"Good."

Welch turned away from the bank and went back to the campfire where a soldier stood at attention.

"Okay, Barnes," he said. "You can get back to Pittsburgh now. Pick up Preacher Comstock, and take him to Mountain Camp. We'll meet you there, and we'll have a little wedding all by ourselves. Then we can ride triumphantly into Pittsburgh, the new King and Queen of America."

Barnes grinned widely, showing white teeth in appreciation.

"Yes, sir," he said, and saluted sharply. "I'll be ready for you."

He turned to go.

"Wait a minute," said Welch.

"Yes, sir."

"Wear your Lieutenant's uniform for the ceremony."

"Lieutenant's uniform . . .?" The soldier's eyes went wide, then he snapped to attention, saluted again. "Thank you sir, I will!"

Welch grinned at him, as he strode off, kicked out the embers of the fire, and went down to the boat where Iverly waited for him.

"Come on," he said, "let's go. The Empire of New America is about to acquire a queen!"

Matt Welch relaxed on the comfortable cushions of the swanky launch he had procured for this purpose, and contentedly watched the shore of Manhattan draw nearer as the fast cruiser purred across the water.

"This'll give that smart guy, Lanier, an idea of who's boss in this country now," he said to himself. "Thinks he can keep that dame for himself, does he? Well, he's got another think coming. Matt Welch don't let no scientific punk snatch a cute number like that away from him—not when she's the last one in the world! Queen Welch, she's gonna be, and our kids is gonna be the first of a long line of royalty!"

He grinned to himself as a thought struck him.

"Adam Welch, that's me!" he said aloud.

"What did you say, sir?" Captain Iverly turned from the wheel.

"I was just thinking out loud," said Welch. "And it's kinda nice thinking."

"I get you, sir," said Iverly, grinning. "I get you."

"HE'S been out like this a week," said Varrone, "but he's coming around now. The chlorophyll disrupted his entire metabolism. I thought for awhile he'd never come out of it."

Sutton stared down at Lanier's face.

"He looks just like she does," he said. "His skin isn't quite as green, but apparently he's succeeded in introduc-

ing the new element successfully. I'd say that in a matter of months, he'd change quite a bit more, and become as much plant-human as Fleurette is."

"I think so," said Varrone, and added bitterly, "and by that time he'll be dead, just as she will. He'll outlast her, because he hasn't as much of it as she has, but when it takes full grip on his body, he'll wither like a hothouse plant put out in freezing temperatures."

"Have you told Fleurette what he's done?"

"No. I didn't know if he'd live, and I didn't want to disturb her. You know, I'm almost certain she heard what we said that day. She knows she's going to die. She's been pretty moody lately."

"I've noticed that. And I'm quite sure she's been planning something. She's been very secretive, and I haven't been able to draw her into conversation."

A moan came from Lanier's lips, and Varrone bent over him.

"Time for a little stimulus," he decided. "I'd better give him a little radiation."

"That reminds me," Sutton said. "I came in to tell you there's a launch coming across the Hudson. I saw it from the tower a half-hour ago. I think it's Matt Welch, coming back."

"Wonder what he wants?" Varrone asked. "I don't care for that fellow much. He's gotten too big for his britches over in Pittsburgh. Got ideas of an Empire of New America, with himself as the head of it."

MATT WELCH paused before the huge doors of Eugenics Laboratories and looked up.

"Well," he said. "We're here. Gimme a couple of those tear-gas bombs, Iverly. We'll probably not need 'em, but I'd just like to make that Lanier guy's eyes smart anyway—before I break him in half."

Captain Iverly handed several of the bombs to Welch, pocketed several himself, and put the rest in a knapsack he slung over his shoulder. Then he loosened the flap on his service revolver holster.

"I'm ready," he said briefly.

They climbed the stairs in silence, the regular clumping sound of their boots echoing up the stair well. They were breathing heavily when they reached the seventieth floor.

"Glad I don't have to climb buildings like this to do all my fighting," puffed Iverly. "I'd get flat feet."

"Shut up," said Welch. "I want to surprise these guys. Don't want to be fooling around breaking down locked doors."

"Sorry, Mr. Welch," came a voice behind him. "We can't accommodate you by being surprised, and I'm afraid you won't have any doors to break down."

Matt Welch whirled around, and faced the leveled automatic in Allan Sutton's hand. He stood still, said nothing.

"What do you want?" asked Sutton.

"The girl," said Welch briefly, levelly.

"I thought so. Well, you can just march right back down those stairs and get out of here, and stay out. She's staying right here."

"Think so?" Welch laughed shortly. "What're you gonna do to stop me from taking her?"

"Kill you, if necessary," said Sutton coldly.

"Well, you'd better start shooting now," said Welch. "Because I'm coming to take that popgun away from you."

He began walking forward slowly.

Sutton's face whitened a bit, but he

didn't waver.

"Two more steps and you are a dead man!" he whispered hoarsely.

A door on the corridor opened. Fleurette stepped out directly between Sutton and the grimly advancing Welch.

"Get back, Fleurette!" said Sutton in alarm. "Don't come any furth—"

But he was too late. Matt Welch, taking swift advantage of the situation, whirled, grasped the girl in his arms, and held her between Sutton's menacing gun and himself.

"Now, Mr. Sutton," he sneered. "If you'll kindly drop that gun, it will prevent Captain Iverly from shooting you through the guts."

The gun clattered to the floor of the corridor from Sutton's nerveless fingers. He stood, white and still, as Iverly advanced, patted his pockets and moved around behind him. The gun jabbed into his spine.

"If you'll lead the way, Mr. Sutton," said Iverly pleasantly, "we'll find some rope and tie you up nice and comfy."

Matt Welch grinned, then transferred his attention to Fleurette, who was squirming in his grasp.

"Take it easy, baby," he said. "I ain't gonna hurt you. I'm going to take you out of this dump, and put you where a girl of your type belongs. You're gonna be a queen, baby, and I ain't kidding about that. Even Cleopatra didn't rule over no Empire like I'm gonna have. This whole damn world will kowtow to both of us, and they'll keep on doing it until they die. But you an' me, we won't die. We'll be Mr. and Mrs. Adam and Eve Welch, and the Welch's will *be* the whole human race, someday."

FLEURETTE stopped squirming and looked up at the face of the big man. There was a strange look in her eyes.

"You mean, you want to take me away from here, and never come back?" she asked.

"That's what I mean, baby," Welch assured her. "We're going to Pittsburgh, our new capital. The Empire of New America. I'm King, and you're gonna be Queen. How's that sound to you, baby? Nothing slow about Matt Welch. You can have everything. Jewels, fancy clothes, anything in the world to pick from."

"You'll go right now," pursued Fleurette, "and take nobody else?"

Matt Welch looked at her.

"Oh, I get it. You want to get away from these dumb scientists who keep you cooped up, eh?"

"Yes, yes, that's it!" she said breathlessly. "You'll leave them behind, won't you?"

Welch laughed aloud.

"Sure, kid. They can stay here and putter around with test tubes and the like. We ain't got no place for them in Pittsburgh. We got more efficient fellows over there. Guys who know how to make guns, and tanks, and planes. . . . "

"Then let's go now," she interrupted. "Here comes Captain Iverly. Let's leave before they know you're here."

"Okay," agreed Welch. He looked at Iverly, who was thrusting his service revolver back into its holster.

"Everything okay, Captain Iverly?" he asked gravely. "If it is, we'll be going, without bothering anybody else. Let 'em think we ain't been here." He winked.

Iverly caught the wink.

"Sure, everything's fine. I tied Sutton up like a mummy, and had a few words with Varrone. He objected, but I persuaded him we were just paying a friendly visit. He doesn't like us, I guess. Anyway, he said to tell you he'd see you in hell. I didn't see Lanier.

Guess he's out paying a social call."

"Well," said Welch easily. "I guess we'll have to skip saying hello to him this time. Maybe he'll drop in for a friendly chat later on, in Pittsburgh. No use wasting time now to pay our respects. So let's get going."

"Yes," said Fleurette eagerly. "I want to see Pittsburgh."

CHAPTER XI

"Some Flowers Have Thorns"

HARLAND LANIER struggled up out of the mists that had clouded his brain for what had seemed an eternity of time. He lay for a moment, eyes closed, trying to remember something. What was it he wanted to do this morning? He shook his head weakly.

"Can't think of it," he muttered. "Couldn't have been very important."

He opened his eyes and stared idly around. Then abruptly he sat up. The movement brought a wave of dizziness, and he fell back again, his face breaking out with sweat.

"The chlorophyll!" he gasped. "Now I remember. I did it already."

He struggled once more erect and clambered from the bed. He was in his pyjamas.

"So Varrone *did* finish up for me," he said wonderingly. "I must have passed out."

He staggered over to the mirror and looked into it. His face was a pale green color, and haggard, thin, drawn. There was a week's growth of beard on his face.

"It worked!" he exclaimed. "Henri Varrone, you're a grand old man. You carried it out to the finish!"

He raised a hand to his beard.

"I must have been sick for a long time," he said wonderingly. "At least a week."

Securing his clothes, he dressed with an effort, shaved, and then turned to the door. His knees wobbled beneath him.

"I *am* weak," he whispered. "I'd better sit down and rest a moment."

When his trembling had ceased, he rose to his feet once more and made his way to the laboratory. The lights were still on, although it was daylight.

"That's odd," he muttered. "And where's everybody?"

He moved forward, rounded a laboratory bench, then stopped short in horror.

"Henri!" he gasped.

Stretched out before him was the limp body of the old biologist. On the floor beside his head was a dried pool of blood, and in the center of his forehead was a ghastly blue hole.

"He's been shot!"

LANIER'S shocked tones echoed through the deserted laboratory. The emptiness of the sound was another shock to him.

"Allan!" he called. "Allan, where are you?"

There was no answer.

Forgetting his weakness, Lanier searched the entire laboratory. Finally, in a darkened corner he found Sutton's trussed up form. Hastily he loosened the ropes that bound him, and removed the gag from his mouth. Then he lifted the paralyzed biologist to his feet and walked him around carefully until he had regained some control of his limbs.

"Water," croaked Sutton with difficulty.

Lanier allowed the biologist to sink down into a chair, then got a beaker full of distilled water from a jug on the shelf. Sutton sipped it slowly, wetting his swollen tongue. Then he lifted himself to his feet.

"Matt Welch," he gasped with an effort. "He came and kidnaped Fleurette. . . . "

Lanier went pale. He gripped Sutton's arm savagely.

"Where'd he take her?"

"To Pittsburgh. He's set up an Empire, he calls it, there, and he's making Fleurette his queen."

"He can't do that—she's going to die!"

Sutton shook his head.

"He doesn't know that. He thinks she's going to be all right."

"We've got to get her," said Lanier. "How long ago was this?"

"I don't know. I think it was yesterday. It seemed longer, but I don't remember more than one night passing."

Sutton chafed his wrists with hands that shook. He stood up.

"I guess I can move now. Let's get started."

He looked closely at Lanier.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "You look pretty weak, but your face certainly looks like Fleurette's. It's the same green, although a little less pronounced in color."

"Never mind that now," said Lanier. "I feel weak, but I'm picking up a bit. Maybe when we get out into that sunshine outside, I'll get a little more strength. It's pretty bright outside for this time of the year."

"Indian summer," acknowledged Sutton. "We should get a couple of days of this weather before snow begins to fly."

"I'll probably need it," said Lanier grimly.

AS Lanier drove the power launch up the sandy shore of the Jersey side of the Hudson, beneath the towering Palisades, the noonday sun was hot and warm in the heavens. The hills were a riot of autumn color, the only sign that this was not the true summer, but only a few days of grace before winter began to close her frosty hand down over the landscape.

"You look a hundred percent better," remarked Sutton. "In fact, you're stronger than I am. It's remarkable the restorative powers the chloro-blood has upon the human system."

He didn't mention the strange change that had taken place in the biologist's hair. It was rusty red, shot through with yellow and brown streaks, like a frost-nipped oak leaf.

"It's the sun," said Lanier. "I feel very strong. I only hope this weather lasts until we get to Matt Welch and settle matters with him."

He strapped a cartridge belt around his waist, and shouldered the rifle. Then he stepped from the boat, and Sutton followed him, similarly armed. They climbed up the steep slope.

At the top, Sutton pointed down.

"There's his launch," he said. "That proves we're on the right track, all right. He wasn't lying about Pittsburgh."

"Pittsburgh's a long way," said Lanier.

"We can get a car in a mile or so. The roads aren't bad. We may have to clear away a fallen tree or two. But I'd say that Welch'd have to take care of that, if he went through this way."

"That's right. Come on, let's get that car."

They found several abandoned autos. Most of them would not run, or had flat tires. But eventually, through dint of switching tires from one car to the other, they got a complete set, and had a car in running condition. It started hard.

"Gas is old," said Sutton, "greatly evaporated."

Several times along the road, they

stopped to drain the gasoline from an abandoned car, until they had a full tank. Then they went on, making fairly good time.

The desolation of the countryside was not lost on them, but Lanier's mind was on his purpose, and Sutton's face was grim as he watched his companion's rapid, fantastic physical changes. The sun was hot, and with its heat, Lanier changed. Although he seemed stronger, he seemed to age by the hour. And his hair became shot through with streaks of grey, and almost white.

All at once Lanier slammed on the brakes. They had just rounded a curve, and a large tree sprawled across the highway.

"Here's where we work," Lanier said, and Sutton tumbled out of the car ahead of him.

"Hey," said Sutton, "that tree didn't fall there —it was cut down!"

"Somebody's trying to delay . . . " began Lanier, stepping from the running board. That was as far as he got.

A sharp rifle shot rang out, and Sutton pitched down on his face. He didn't move a muscle after he hit the ground. But Lanier was greased lightning. He'd seen the movement in the brush atop a small hill at the side of the road ahead. He whipped his rifle up and fired.

A scream came from the hill and a uniformed figure lurched into view, teetered on the edge, then tumbled down, head over heels.

Lanier knelt beside Sutton, turned him over. Then he got slowly to his feet.

He walked over to where the man he had shot lay inert.

"Iverly!" he said. "The trade isn't very even. A skunk for a man. There'll be a little evening up later."

HE went back to the car, set to work on the tree blocking the road. He could move it only a few feet, but casting a critical glance at the hole he had made, and the ditch beside the road, he climbed back into the car.

He drove the car through the gap, ignoring the branch that dented the top and tore a fender loose. Then, without stopping, he drove on into the gathering dusk.

He drove all night, making slow time because of the dark, the half-ruined road, and unexpected obstacles. But with sun-up, he was perhaps twenty miles from Pittsburgh.

It had obviously rained in this region, and as he passed through a low area, he reached a stretch where the road was covered with mud from a creek that had overflowed its banks. Through the mud were the unmistakable tire tracks of a car. They looked as though they had been made less than twenty-four hours before.

It was a half-hour later when he saw the car, its wheels still muddy, standing beside the road, apparently abandoned.

Lanier stopped, got out, and walked around it. He saw footprints instantly, and he stiffened as he saw the tiny heelprints of a woman's shoe.

"Fleurette!" he burst out. "I'm on the right track!"

He looked at the car.

"But why did they abandon it? Out of gas?"

He looked into the tank. It was half-full. He cast a sharp glance around, then followed the footprints, which led up the hill at the side of the road and went off into the countryside.

He cocked his rifle and followed, a grim expression on his face. The sun was beating over the trees now, and the birds were awakening. The air was fresh and invigorating, but off to the west a cloud bank was looming, and as he walked along, the wind changed.

Abruptly it grew colder. He shivered, walked on faster.

Then he saw the resort building. It was a magnificent summer home, and obviously the sort of place that would appeal to Matt Welch.

Lanier changed his course. He went through the forest, his steps making no noise in the wet leaves that lay everywhere. He went around to the back of the summer home.

There was no sound.

Lanier advanced cautiously, came up onto the rear porch. He peered into a window, but saw nothing. He tried the door. It was ajar. He entered. Inside, the house was as silent as outside. There seemed no life. Had Matt Welch and Fleurette gone?

He stepped into the front room. Then he stood stock still.

Stretched out on the floor, his blood staining the carpet, was Matt Welch. In his back was the haft of a nickle-plated envelope knife fashioned in the design of a cavalry sword.

THEN the prone man stirred, groaned, tried convulsively to roll over.

Lanier leaped forward. He turned the dying man over, and met the agonized eyes of the king of New America.

"Hello, Lan-ier," gasped Welch. "You got here—a little—la—late."

"What do you mean? Where's Fleurette?"

Lanier's face was savage. He felt no pity for the man before him.

Welch gritted his teeth in pain.

"Gone — out in the forest—to—to die!" he gasped out. "That's what she said, any—anyway. The damned wench stabbed me in the back as soon as the preacher went . . . "

"Preacher?"

Welch grinned through his agony.

"Sure . . . Yeah—smart guy, we was mar—married last light. She's the—new queen of New — America. I thought she—was on the—the level! When I kissed her, she stabbed me. She was only—stringing me. Just—wanted to get away from—from you . . . "

Lanier paled.

"From me?"

"Yeah. Said she loved you, but she knew she was . . . " Welch coughed bloody foam, and his voice grew unintelligible for a few seconds. Then he went on, obviously realizing he hadn't been understood, repeating: "She knew she—was dying—like a plant, or a—flower. Yeah, a flower—and damn, she's got th—thorns too. Stuck that knife — into me like a major."

His eyes were glazing over.

"Didn't want to make you sad—she said — so she came away — with me. Knew she'd die—anyway. I was a—a sucker . . . fall guy!"

With a supreme effort Matt Welch reeled to his feet, stood swaying, his unseeing eyes trying to find Lanier. He laughed rackingly.

"Fall guy — Matt Welch—emperor —fall gu . . . "

His big body crashed to the floor. He was dead.

Lanier stood with a strange exultance on his face.

"She loves me!" he exclaimed. "She said she loved me!"

He looked down at the body of Matt Welch, then strode from the room. Outside a bitter blast of cold wind bit into his marrow as he stepped off the porch. He ignored it, sought for the tell-tale heelprints that would tell him where Fleurette had gone. He found them.

They led further up into the hills. Lanier followed. And as he walked, his pace quickened.

Once he glanced at his hand, saw that his skin was turning a deep green. He

grunted, then pushed on, watching for the heelprints that would keep him on the right track.

It began to snow, and a queer chill crept up his spine.

"When the snow falls, she will die!"

The words rang through his brain like the knell of doom. He quickened his pace.

"I've *got* to reach her before—" He didn't finish the sentence.

A VAGUE wonder crept into his mind as he plunged on tirelessly through the gathering storm. He wasn't tiring. He felt stronger than he had before. The thought of Fleurette in this storm, failing, dying, spurred him on. And too, she was more plant-like than he. His still-predominant human heredity would naturally carry him further into the winter.

Then, in the snow before him, he saw her footprints! They were only a few minutes old, obviously, since the snow had been there only a few minutes. The way led up a steep hill now, and Lanier urged himself forward, his panting lungs taking in great draughts of the cold mountain air.

Through the snow ahead he saw a dark form standing against the sky. And a pealing, girlish, happy laugh floated down to him. She was laughing! She was there, standing erect in the snowstorm, *laughing!*

"Fleurette!" he shouted. "Fleurette! I'm coming!"

He climbed up the few remaining feet to her, and stopped before her, staring in amazement.

She was more beautiful than he had ever seen her before. Her hair was almost blue-black, and tumbled over her shoulders in a cascade of loveliness. Her face was wet with snow, but shining with a fresh green color, deeper than he had ever seen it before. Her eyes were bright green, and radiant.

"Harland!" she exclaimed, laughing joyously.

She threw her arms around his neck and her lips met his, pressed tight. They were warm and soft, and they clung passionately.

"Fleurette, my darling," he said tenderly when she stopped kissing him and looked up at him with sparkling eyes.

"I thought I wouldn't reach you in time," he said tenderly. "I found Matt Welch, and he said you'd come up here to die. I'm . . . "

She stopped him, staring at his face.

"What have you done to yourself?" she asked wonderingly. "Your face It's green like mine!"

"I made myself like you," he said. "That night on the balcony when you didn't respond to my proposal—when your kiss was so cold, I thought it was because I wasn't like you that you didn't respond. So I took the chloro-blood treatment. Then Allan told me the truth: that you were truly a plant, a flower, and that you would die when the snow came. . . . "

"*And you made yourself like me,* knowing that. . . . "

"It's all right," he hastened on. "I didn't want to live on without you. Now we can both die together. We have a few hours of happiness remaining to us—"

She laughed in his face.

"A few hours! Oh you silly boy. You lovable, brave, silly boy!"

He was bewildered. But he took her in his arms and held her close.

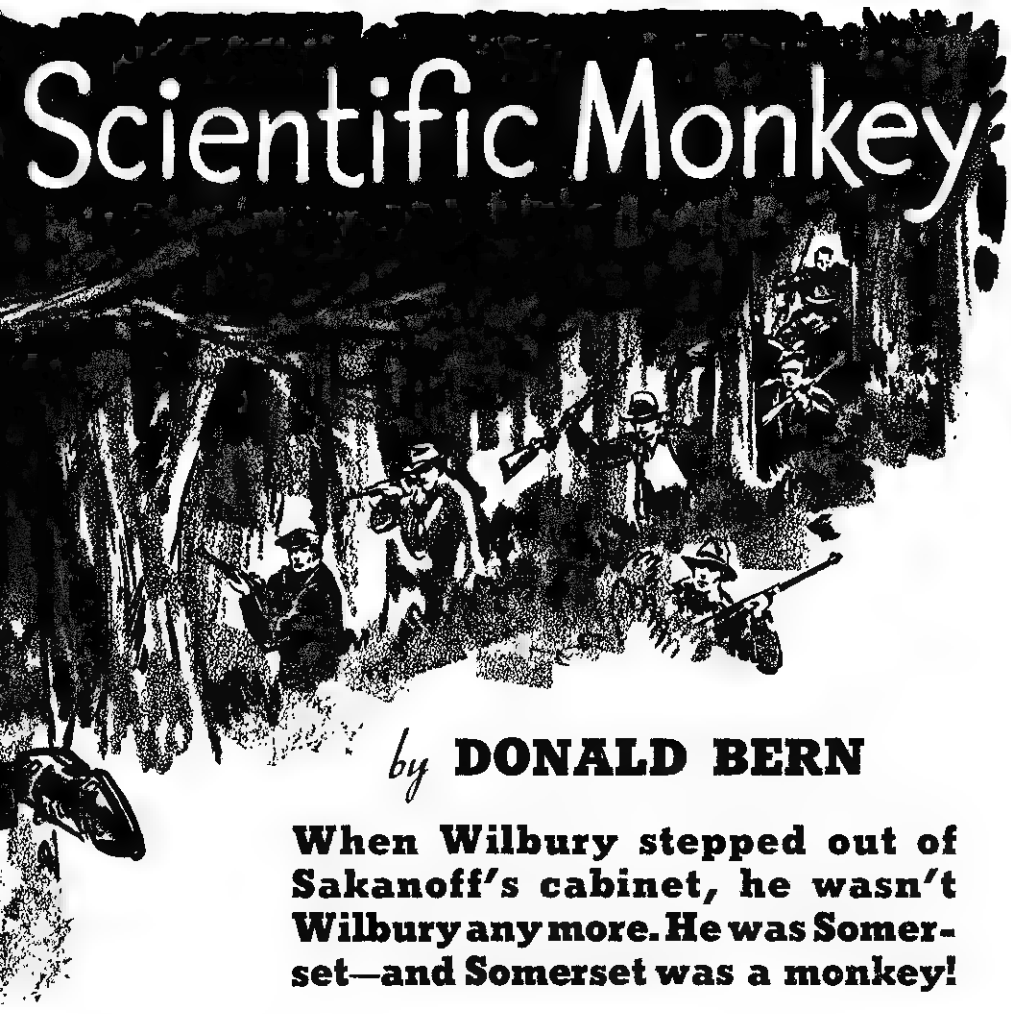
"It's all right," he said comfortingly. "At least we will have had that. Life hasn't cheated us altogether. Man has perished from Earth, but perhaps someday, somewhere, he will appear again. And maybe then we'll meet. . . ."

She struggled to free her head from

(Concluded on page 53)

Somerset leaped into a tree with Margo Ann under his arm

Scientific Monkey



by **DONALD BERN**

When Wilbury stepped out of Sakanoff's cabinet, he wasn't Wilbury any more. He was Somerset—and Somerset was a monkey!

WHEN that son of a Cossack, Ivan Sakanoff, and pretty Marge Ann drove up in front of our house in Ivan's new auto, I was on the porch watching Somerset, my pet monkey, make love to a rag doll. As far as I know, Somerset was the only monkey in the world that made love to a rag doll. He crushed the thing to his brown little body and murmured sweetly, "Yeek! Yeek! Yeek! Yeek!"

Ivan honked the horn of his auto and motioned me over. I left the porch and shuffled toward them.

"Hullo, Marge Ann. Hullo, Ivan," I muttered. I wondered what it was he wanted. If he didn't have that white, scared look on his usually smug puss, I'd think that he just wanted to show off his new car and make me envious that Marge Ann rode with him. I was awful in love with Marge Ann and Ivan knew it. She was the prettiest and snootiest girl in town, and I am always the slave of pretty and snooty girls.

"Horace," Ivan almost whispered, "tell your father that my dad has invented something important he wants to show him. Something dangerous, maybe, I dunno. He's been acting funny lately. Mysterious. Won't let anyone into his laboratory—Hurry, and I'll drive you over."

"All right, Ivan," I said. "Be with

you in a minute."

I turned and headed straight toward father's basement laboratory. Somerset skipped along at my heels, dragging his doll after him.

As I stumbled down the basement steps, father raised his round, pale face toward me. He had a dreamy look in his gray eyes so I knew right off that he'd been puttering with an invention of his own. Father was an inventor, just like Sakanoff, and the two were always trying to outdo each other in inventing ridiculous gadgets. They were both maybe the greatest impractical inventors in the whole world.

"Oh, it's you, Horace," father murmured slowly.

I was a little surprised. Usually when father has that hazy expression he doesn't know me from Geronimo. It could be Geronimo, that blood thirsty Indian, walking around the house and father wouldn't know it.

"Yeah," I agreed, "It's me. And I bear a message—"

"Horace," father broke in, "did you ever stop to realize that time is only a product of motion? That there could be no such thing as time unless there was motion?"

I am accustomed to having such things thrown at me by father. Therefore, I did not gape or even gasp. I bit my lip and said quietly, "Fine. Wonderful even. But—"

Father turned from me and pointed proudly to something big and white that stood in a corner.

"That," he exclaimed in a rising voice, "is my Motion Master! Within it I am able to speed up enormously the passage of time!"

"You won't!" I gurgled. "I mean—you can't. It isn't. Ah—that's our old refrigerator!"

Father continued: "I repeat, only *within* the Motion Master am I able to hurry time along. Simply put, the acceleration of the normal passage of time is achieved through the speeding up of natural processes, which, in turn, is achieved by the intricate exercise of motion. Kind of like putting the cart before the horse. Understand?"

I counted to ten. After all, I calmed myself, there were some fellows who'd be proud to have their dad an inventor, even if he did seem a little off at times. Uh huh. Sure. I ought to be glad.

"You deserve a medal," I said quietly. "Anyway, Sakanoff wants to show you something he's stuck together. He's been working on it in secret. Ivan looks scared. Thinks it might be dangerous."

Father said, "Phooey."

A MINUTE or so later, father, myself and Somerset, climbed into the rear of Ivan's auto. I didn't know it then, but I was to bitterly regret having taken Somerset with me. Finally, we pulled to the curb in front of Sakanoff's place. The one time Cossack was waiting for us in his garage laboratory, his dark, heavy face gloating. In fact, every inch of his tall, powerful body seemed to be gloating. His thick lips twisted in a sneer and he said, "Ah, Wilbury and son!" His beady eyes caught mine. "Horace, you're looking more like your old man every day," he added, smirking.

Just then Somerset flung his eighteen inch length to the top of a very peculiar looking clothes locker and hugged his doll enthusiastically. He chattered something and Marge Ann giggled at him sweetly.

"Sakanoff!" father squeaked roughly as he could, "You've disturbed me during a very important experiment. I wish you would cease annoying me with your quite useless inventions! I have better things to do than—"

Sakanoff rubbed his hands together and chuckled very unpleasantly. Not many people can chuckle as unpleasantly as Sakanoff.

"Wilbury," he addressed father, "my day of revenge has arrived. My invention will amaze the scientific world. I have achieved in fact what others, lesser men, have only dreamed of!"

"Go on, go on," father mumbled as the other hesitated. Father's pale face had become tinged with red. I guess he was bursting to tell Sakanoff about his Motion Master thing.

Sakanoff pointed to the strange looking clothes locker, atop which Somerset perched with the doll. "This is half of the machine," he said, "and that's the other half." He indicated an identical locker standing some yards away.

"It doesn't look like anything to me," Marge Ann murmured in a puzzled tone of voice.

SAKANOFF'S dark face twisted into a mass of frowns. He turned toward Marge Ann, snapping, "Don't you know that the true scientist never gives up his work for lack of proper instruments? If need be, he makes his tools out of the simplest materials at hand. Thus, I was able to construct this with the aid of the lockers—"

Father broke in impatiently, "What does the thing do—if anything?"

Sakanoff turned back to father.

"I haven't tested it as yet," he replied stiffly, "I waited for you— My invention will enable a man to exchange his own intellect for that of another man. It works on the theory that brain power is like electric power, that thought is the release of this stored power. What my machine does is to transfer the entire *stored brain power* from one mind to another mind, and vice versa. Understand, little man?"

Father reddened. "Of course I do!" he said shrilly. "I worked along the same lines myself once— But I've yet to see if your machine will work!"

Sakanoff ran his right hand over his bald head thoughtfully. His cold, black eyes ran up and down father's chubby body, flickered to father's pale peanut nose and to his white curly hair.

"I mean to test it now," he growled. "And I suggest that you and I exchange intellects, Wilbury, just for the duration of the experiment." He smirked. "Unless you're afraid—?"

Father raised his white head proudly. "I'm not afraid," he said. "Let's get this over with. I doubt if it will work—"

Sakanoff shrugged his burly shoulders and snickered, "You'll find out. Get inside one of the lockers. I'll get in the other."

Father wriggled into the small space of a locker and Sakanoff slammed shut the metal door. He turned to Ivan and mumbled some brief instructions. Then he shuffled toward the second locker, the one atop which Somerset spooned with the rag doll. Suddenly, he stopped. A peculiar gleam came into his eyes. A very peculiar gleam. In fact, I didn't like it. He glanced up toward Somerset, then flashed a look in the direction of the locker into which father had disappeared.

That quick look told me what he had in mind. My heart did a jig. "Hey, better not," I choked. "In fact, don't!"

Sakanoff paid me no attention. He reached up with his muscular right arm, snatched Somerset from the top of the locker and shoved him inside! Banging shut the door, he sprang to the controls of the machine and pulled several levers. The hum of an electric motor filled the garage laboratory.

"You shouldn't have done that, Sakanoff," I reproached weakly, "now what's going to happen?"

The former Cossack chuckled un-

pleasantly!

MARGE ANN turned to Ivan and murmured, "You men are so silly. Will you drive me home, Ivan? Huh?"

"Sure, Marge Ann. In a minute . . ." he whispered. Ivan was staring at the lockers as I was. What was happening inside them? Sakanoff had his eyes glued to a small gauge.

"You shouldn't have done that," I muttered uneasily for the second time.

The seconds crawled and finally two minutes had passed. Sakanoff pushed the levers back and the electric motor hushed. He was breathing quickly. Then he moved toward the locker into which father had wriggled. I leaned forward tensely. Ivan's mouth dropped open. Even Marge Ann was awed. Sakanoff yanked open the locker door, exposing father.

"Pop!" I choked. "Are you all right? D'you feel like yourself?"

Father bounded from the locker with amazing agility.

"Ah . . . !" Sakanoff exclaimed triumphantly.

Father said, "Yeek! Yeek! Yeek! Yeek!"

SAKANOFF laughed harshly, "It worked, just the way I thought it would! Now Wilbury has Somerset's intellect. I'd say it was an improvement!" Then Sakanoff ran his right hand over his shiny pate thoughtfully and said, "No doubt, Wilbury now believes he *is* Somerset . . . *On second thought, it is Somerset in Wilbury's body!*"

As though to confirm Sakanoff's words, father—Somerset—bent and scooped up the tattered doll, which had fallen to the floor, and hugged it to him! I didn't need more proof.

"Ye Gads!" I croaked. "Open the other locker!" Sakanoff did. The monkey skipped out, looked up at us with a puzzled expression. Sakanoff grinned down at the little brown body.

"Hello, Wilbury!" he smirked. "Do you agree now that my invention is a success?"

The tiny figure of Somerset shook a clenched fist at the inventor, muttered something that sounded like, "You big bum!" I repeat, it just *sounded* like that. Father may have been trying to say something else. In any case, I'd had enough of this monkey business—

I stepped forward, putting myself in front of Sakanoff.

"Listen, you Cossack!" I barked. "What you've done is to put Somerset in my father's body and father in Somerset's body. Now you better straighten things out before something happens—"

Something happened! Marge Ann screamed!

Sakanoff muttered, "What the hell —?" and spun around quickly. So did Ivan. So did I. Then my jaw dropped open and Ivan yelped something unintelligible.

Somerset, in father's body, had dropped the rag doll and was enthusiastically hugging Marge Ann!

"Ye Gads!" I gasped. *"He thinks Marge Ann is a doll!"*

Ivan grabbed hold of Marge Ann's pretty right leg and began to pull. Somerset jerked away, turned quickly, and with Marge Ann clutched tightly to his chest sped out of the garage laboratory.

"Hey!" I yelped. "Stop that. Cut it out. Come back here!" Father—Somerset — ignored me. Somerset seemed to like his new doll and he didn't want anyone to take it away. I lit out after him and bumped into Sheriff Abbott who was just entering. Sheriff Abbott had a long skinny body, a long face and a long nose. He wasn't much

to look at. If he didn't wear a star, a person would think he was a soda jerk in Thatcher's drug store.

"What's going on here?" he grunted puzzledly. "I was driving by. Who screamed?"

By this time, Somerset was half a block down Elmhurst Avenue, heading in the direction of Snobble Woods. Somerset often liked to spend a day in Snobble Woods, playfully springing around among the trees . . .

"We got to catch Somerset!" Ivan chattered excitedly. "He's got Marge Ann! See?" he pointed.

Abbott twisted around and glared down Elmhurst Avenue. His thick eyebrows raised up, his mouth fell open and he hollered, "Wilbury, stop that! Come back here!"

Ivan tapped Abbott on a boney shoulder. "Please, sheriff, that's not Wilbury—"

Abbott whirled around. "Not Wilbury?" he shrieked. "You're crazy! I know Wilbury when I see him!"

I thought, a fine job we'd have explaining it all to him. I'd better take things into my own hands— I dodged past the sheriff and continued to chase after Somerset. Marge Ann was screaming pretty steadily now, and the whole town was coming outdoors to investigate the trouble.

"It's Wilbury!" some big guy bellowed. "He's gone crazy and he's got a girl!"

"Stop him!" an old woman shouted shrilly. "Stop him! He's murdering her!"

"Somebody shoot him!" another voice put in.

I bent over, expecting a shotgun blast any second.

"Ummmmph!" Some big lug plowed into me, grabbed my throat. In a second I was flat on my back with this bruiser perching on my chest. "Ahhh!" he crowed. "Got you!"

I lifted my head weakly and gazed after Somerset. He'd reached the edge of Snobble Woods with Marge Ann and was scaling up a tree. I knew that in a second he'd be going further into the woods, swinging from branch to branch. Maybe he'd break his neck. But it was too late to stop him now. It would take an organized search to find him.

MEANWHILE, the hefty individual on my chest decided to wring my neck. Maybe he thought there was a reward out for me, dead or alive. In any case, it required almost a minute, between gags, to convince him that he was slaughtering an innocent man. Disappointed, he removed himself from me, and I got to my feet.

Sheriff Abbott came striding up, followed by a big crowd. I tried to disappear but Abbott put a boney hand on my shoulder, raised one eyebrow and glared at me.

"Horace," he grunted. "Your father has done a dastardly thing. But perhaps he's lost his mind. When did he first show queer symptoms?"

I bit my lip and said quietly, "Sheriff, believe me, father is not insane. All this is just the unfortunate result of an experiment. What you believe to be father is really a monkey—"

The way Sheriff Abbott's eyes hardened then softened, I knew I'd have done better to shut up. He thought I was nutty, too. He smiled slightly, showing buck teeth, and said, "Horace, my boy, why don't you go home and rest a bit, eh?"

Just then a little fat man elbowed his way to the front of the crowd. He planted himself in front of Abbott and said hoarsely, "Sheriff, the people of Snobble Town demand action! Something must be done –and quickly—to rescue that girl from a madman! Her

fate is your responsibility!"

Abbott swayed slightly under the verbal blitz and for a bad moment I thought he was going to faint. But he pulled through.

"Ah, yes . . . action!" he murmured. "Shooting . . . and things like that." He straightened suddenly and threw out his pigeon chest. He faced the crowd.

"The law will handle this!" he growled a little weakly. "You men who want to join a posse step forward! We'll search the woods before Wilbury gets too far with Marge Ann. I'll give rifles to the men that don't own one!"

Rifles! Shooting! It had come to this! I staggered forward, choking, "No! You mustn't! You'll kill him!"

"We've got to save the girl, men!" a rough voice bellowed. "I'm going home to get my gun."

Sheriff Abbott put his hand to my shoulder again and looked down into my eyes. He was sorry for me.

"He'll come back by himself! He'll come back by himself!" I chattered. "He always does! Don't—"

Abbott shook his head slowly and said softly, "After all, Horace, we've got to consider Marge Ann . . ." He turned from me and muttered to the men who had volunteered for the posse, "All right. Come to my office, I'll swear you in."

As the crowd began to disperse, I sniffled a moment, then cried, "But you don't understand! You've got to believe me! You've got to listen—" A tear dribbled down my nose. No one cared to listen any longer. But once they caught up with Somerset in father's body they'd shoot. Kill him, most likely. And then poor father would be *doomed to end his days in the body of a monkey!*

I WIPED the dust from my trousers and started slowly back up Elmhurst Avenue. Things were black. No doubt about that. Black. In a few minutes the posse would be taking to the woods after Somerset—Somerset in father's body, that is—and father would be destined to remain in Somerset's body if his own were killed. He would never get over it. And mother wouldn't like it either. Father existing in the shape of a monkey!

"Maybe Sakanoff can do something about this," I muttered hopefully. "It's all his fault anyway!"

A few more steps brought me to Sakanoff's house and I turned into the yard and entered the small brick bungalow. Sakanoff was sprawled in an armchair, a half emptied bottle of vodka or something resting on a table beside him. He gazed up at me through bleary eyes and I knew where the other half had gone.

"Hor-ish," he invited, "sit down and have a little of thish good stuff. Everyshing is gonna be shwell!"

I couldn't expect any help from him, that was clear. I guess my shoulders drooped as I left Sakanoff's place and headed for my own home. Some distance away the posse was making for Snobble Woods. From the distance it seemed to me that one of the men was fashioning a noose, I couldn't be sure. I didn't want to be sure.

By the time I shuffled into the Wilbury homestead I was shuddering and trying desperately hard to think. I had to do *something*. But what? There *had* to be *something* I could do to save father's body!

I entered father's study, sat myself at his desk and held my head in thought. "Come, Brain, perform!" I begged. But after a while I decided it was no use. I was beaten. I started to get up from the desk and all of a sudden two words in front of a jumble of other words written on some sheets of paper, swam

into my vision. The two words were: *Motion Master.*

Obviously, father had written some notes pertaining to his latest invention and left them here on his desk. I didn't have anything else to do so I lifted a sheet and read a little further:

"The acceleration of time is achieved by the speeding up of natural processes. Natural processes can be hurried by the correct use of motion, as in my Motion Master. This machine, then, *accomplishes the aging of years in minutes!*"

It was stuff typical of father. Silly—to believe that a machine could actually *age* an object *years* in just *minutes. Actually make it older.* Naw, I couldn't believe that. If I did, I'd not only be looking more like father every day, as Sakanoff had smirkingly remarked, but I'd be *thinking* like him.

Looking more like father every day! Was it true? If it was, then in about thirty years or so I'd be almost an exact image of father today. In thirty years . . . A peculiar idea tickled my brain: if the Motion Master worked as father claimed it would, then it could make me older in a very short while!

I sat straight as an idea formed—There was a way to save father!

"You've got to do it, Horace," I told myself.

I LEFT the study and hurried to father's laboratory. The Motion Master stood alone in a corner. Now that I saw it closely it bore only a faint resemblance to a mechanical ice box. Gadgets and springs seemed to sprout from every corner of the thing. Springs and more springs, as though father had taken apart a thousand clocks and fitted it all to the inside of his machine.

A dial with a knob in the center gave instructions— Each full turn of the knob was equal to a year. Carefully, I turned it thirty times. This would bring me to about father's age—if the machine worked! Then, mumbling a short prayer, I crawled inside. The springs pressed against me, massaging. I started to get dizzy. Things were going around in circles—or maybe I was. Then after a while I felt that I was the sun, and revolving around me were a lot of little planets. It was a silly way to feel. I kept looking down at the little planets and thinking how important I was—

When I came to, the springs had run out and were motionless. I tumbled out of the Motion Master and hurried to examine myself in a full length mirror that stood in the hall— I blinked my eyes. I had become *chubby.* I had curly *white* hair. My nose looked like a *peanut.* My face was *round and mild.*

"Ye Gads!" I yelped.

I looked so much like father, that I'd fool even myself!

THE Motion Master *did* work.

But I had more to do than stand and gape, and not much time to do it in. The posse might even now be closing in on Somerset, ready to shoot, since they believed it meant saving Marge Ann—

It took me about ninety seconds to change into father's blue suit, and then I was hurrying as fast as I could to Snobble Woods. It was getting on toward evening now. I listened for gunfire.

Ten minutes later I could hear men calling to each other. Excitedly, as they crashed through the thick brush. Well, I knew Snobble Woods better than they. A short cut along an old path brought me ahead of the possemen and the sheriff. Then I leaned nonchalantly against a tree and waited for them to catch up.

Sheriff Abbott was the first one to

see me. His long jaw dropped open and he jerked his rifle up. He gagged a moment, then choked out, "Put up your hands, Wilbury!" His own hands shook like a leaf in a gale. The possemen bunched together around Abbott, staring at me scared-like.

"Good evening, gentlemen," I said, in father's best manner. "Is something wrong?"

They gaped a moment, then a pug-nosed gent warned, "Careful, men! He's treacherous! All madmen are."

"Let's shoot him," someone suggested.

"And ask questions later," a quaking little man added.

Sheriff Abbott knocked down a leveled rifle barrel, and I breathed easier. I decided then that when I reached twenty-one, I'd vote to re-elect Abbott. He wasn't a bad sort even if he didn't look like much. "The law will handle this!" he growled weakly.

He took a few short steps toward me and I wondered what he was up to. Then before I knew what was happening, he'd snapped handcuffs over my wrists. That was all right with me. I had fooled them into thinking I was father and that was enough.

"Where's Marge Ann?" the pug-nose gent hollered suddenly. It seemed as though they'd forgotten about her for the moment.

"She went that way," I replied quietly, and pointed toward town. "I'm going that way myself," I added, "would you like to come along?"

A dozen of the possemen surrounded me and we started back to town, arriving just as the skies were turning dark. Among the crowd that met us was Sakanoff, bleary-eyed and clutching a bottle of vodka. When he saw me, he shook his head and staggered up to Sheriff Abbott. No doubt, he thought I was Somerset.

"Thish ish all my fault, your honor," he mumbled. "It wush my experiment. I know how to make Wilbury regain hish senses. Bring'im to my lab—laboratory. Everyshing will be shwell . . . "

Sheriff Abbott looked at him doubtfully.

"Pleash, your honor," Sakanoff begged.

Abbott scratched his long nose thoughtfully and grunted, "All right, Sakanoff! I don't know what you have in your mind, but don't try to get away with anything—"

Maybe Abbott didn't know what Sakanoff had in mind, but I did. And I didn't like it. Sakanoff still thought that I was Somerset—Somerset in father's body. Therefore, he wanted to undo his experiment— Which would be fine, only I wasn't Somerset. If Sakanoff had his way—*I*, instead of father, would be in Somerset's monkey body. Father would think he'd regained his own body, whereas he'd be dwelling in mine—aged by the Motion Master. He wouldn't know the difference—maybe.

In any case, I knew one think: I had to get away—and fast! For the moment, no one was watching me. I whirled around, bent over and started to run like hell.

"Yeeooow! Stop him!" Sheriff Abbott screeched. But I had a good start. I scooted for home as fast as I could, the sheriff and the possemen half a block behind. Home seemed the safest place.

I skidded around a corner and banged into—*Marge Ann!*

"Oooohhh!" she gasped, staggering back.

"Excuse me," I murmured, full of confusion, and kept my legs moving the remaining distance home. Then I jerked to a halt—Curled up on the

porch like a kitten, obviously asleep, was Somerset! Somerset in father's body, of course. He'd come home!

THE possemen came stamping around the corner, but before any one caught sight of me I dodged behind a wooden fence. Then men saw Somerset curled up on the porch.

"Close in, men!" the sheriff rasped. He had his rifle aimed. The men took cautious steps forward. Several held ropes ready for tying. Somerset slept on. The possemen took several more steps.

"Careful!" someone warned. "He's only fooling. If he attacks, shoot to kill!"

Then the pug-nosed gent tossed a noose around father's—Somerset's—head. The rope tightened. Somerset slept on.

Sakanoff, still happy with vodka, reeled up to the porch.

"We've got him!" he crowed. "Now lesh get him ober to my lab—laboratory. Everyshing is gonna be fixshed up!"

The possemen raised Somerset, still snoozing, off the porch and lugged him toward Sakanoff's laboratory. And there, as it happened, Sakanoff "fixshed everyshing up." Father's intellect was transferred back to his own body and Somerset became a monkey once more.

Oh, yes. Father is now hard at work on an invention that will reverse the effect of time or something. Make things grow younger, maybe. And I hope he succeeds, cause looking the way I do, Marge Ann won't have anything to do with me. Not only that, but I had to learn how to shave, and that gets tiresome after awhile. My jaws used to be hairless.

THE TEST TUBE GIRL

(Concluded from page 43)

his shoulder, tossed it back, and looked up at his face with eyes that sparkled with life.

"*Will* you listen to me!" she exclaimed. "Harland Lanier, did you ever hear of a perennial?"

"Perennial?" He stared at her.

"Yes. Can't you understand. We *are* plants. As much plant as human. But we *aren't* going to die. We just change with the seasons. Look, even now, your hair is turning from the autumn colors to black. There's not a gray hair on your head. And if you think you aren't strong—I have some bruised ribs to prove it!"

He looked into her eyes with incredulity that gradually changed to belief.

"You're right!" he gasped. "You *are* perennial! You're as healthy and alive and vibrant and fresh as a young fir tree! You're not a flower any more; you're a fir tree!"

"Yes," she said. "And the whole world, and a lifetime is ahead of us. And maybe the race of lovely plant-humans we'll start will know how to use this lovely world better than humans have used it in the past."

Harland Lanier looked up into the falling snow, and he let it pelt against his face.

He laughed aloud out of sheer joy.

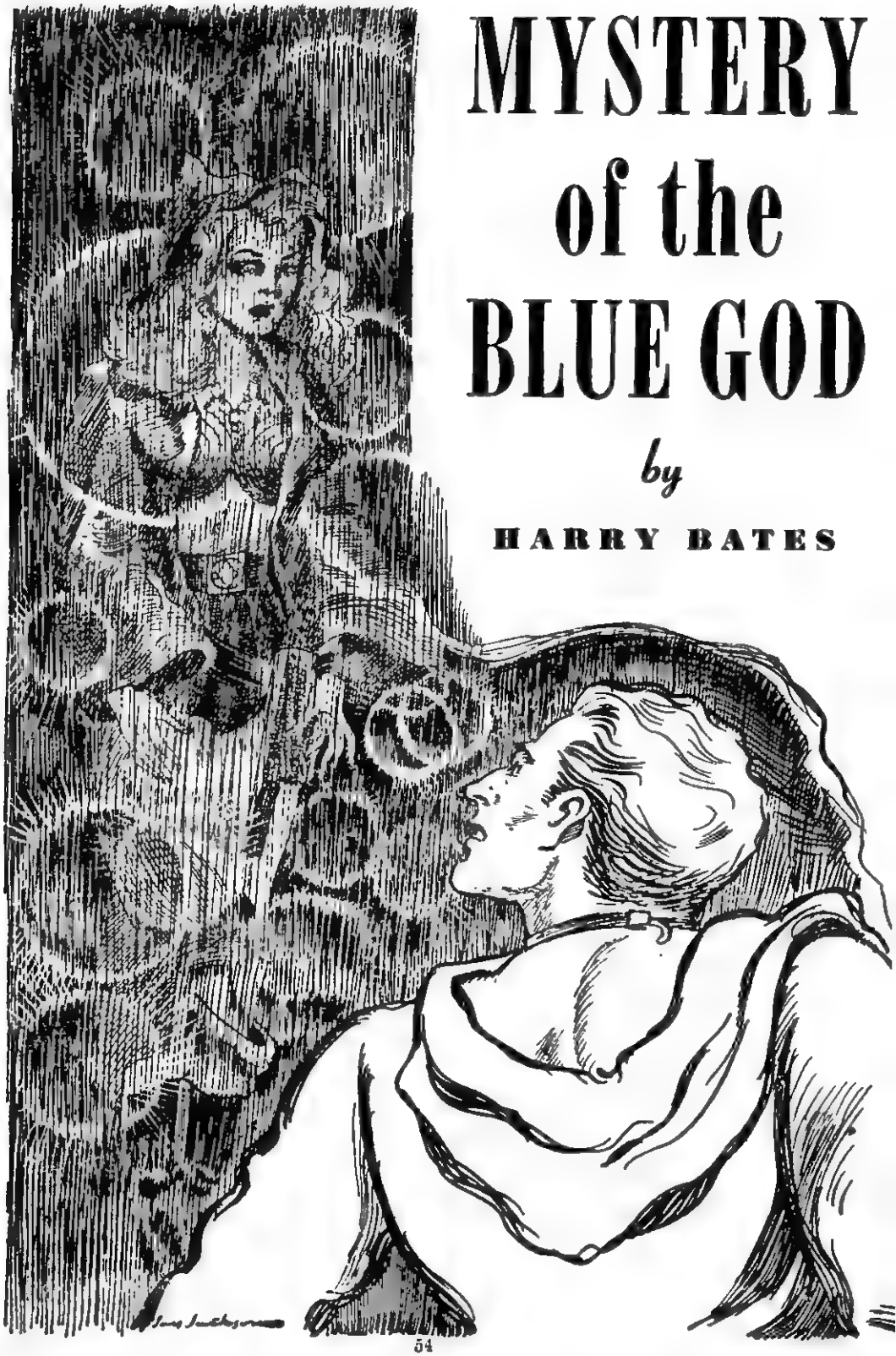
"Turn your face up," he said. "That snow feels so good, and clean, and fresh!"

Then they stood, arm in arm, laughing up at the snow.

MYSTERY of the BLUE GOD

by

HARRY BATES



Why was Mickey so out of place in this world? Why couldn't he receive thoughts like others?

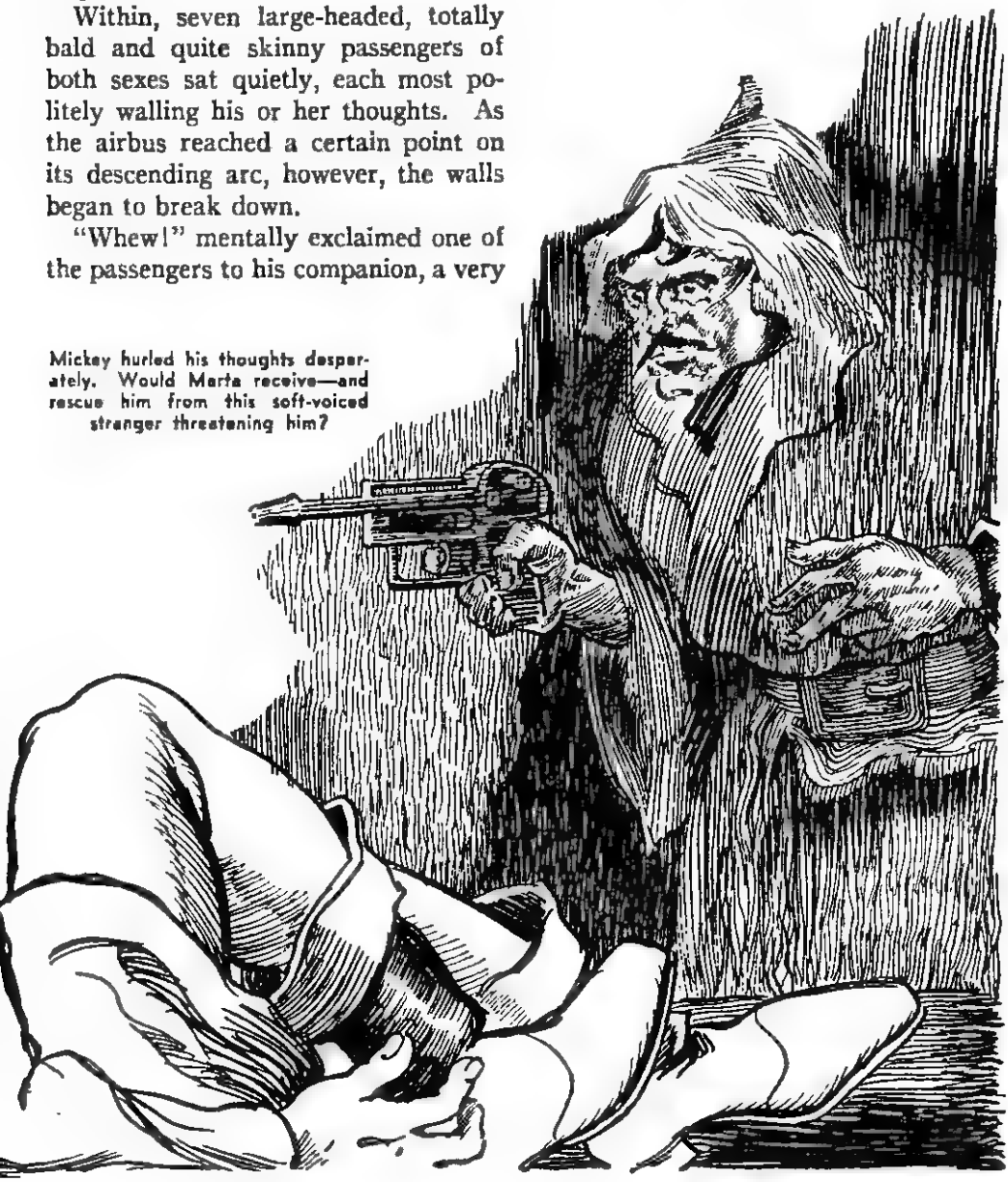
THE door of the local closed, and complicated circuits, dispensing with the need for a pilot, again assumed the calculations and control which would take the little airbus through a long smooth arc to its next stop.

Within, seven large-headed, totally bald and quite skinny passengers of both sexes sat quietly, each most politely walling his or her thoughts. As the airbus reached a certain point on its descending arc, however, the walls began to break down.

"Whew!" mentally exclaimed one of the passengers to his companion, a very old woman and his mother. "Did you get that?"

"No. What was it, son?" she said curiously.

These two were both citizens of the second class, but age had dulled the



Mickey hurled his thoughts desperately. Would Marta receive—and rescue him from this soft-voiced stranger threatening him?

once-keen sensitivity of the woman, and for faint waves, now, she had to rely on the capacity of others.

"It's that young imbecile, Mickey," he thought to her, beaming the words so that the others in the car would not overcatch.

"What?"

"It's Mickey, the imbecile," the son repeated with more intensity. "He's somewhere ahead, talking to the girl Marta."

"What about?" asked the old woman. "Love, as usual?"

"Yes, love as usual," answered the other shaking his head, half annoyed and half amused. "The State really should do something about that primitive. His thoughts would stop an asteroid! Love! Love! A million amps of emotion, at ten million volts! Is it not absurd? An imbecile falls in love, and behold, the whole countryside has willy-nilly to resonate with him!"

The man exaggerated a little, for citizens of the first and second classes and, to a lesser degree, the third, could, with a little effort, wall out even Mickey's thoughts—but he did not exaggerate the power of those thoughts. They were even penetrating the walls of the bus.

The man's mother brought him back from the general to the particular—as women in all ages are wont to do.

"Details" she demanded. "Just what is he thinking?"

"Saying," her son gently corrected. "Our citizens of the fifth class can hardly be said to speak together, much less think together. What is now going on in his head is very powerful, but not very interesting, I am afraid, Mother. It seems he loves her. He loves her very much. He says he will ask to be taken to the lethal chamber if he cannot have her. He even almost thinks he means it."

These two were the only citizens of the second class in the bus. All the others were of the third.

The most sensitive of the thirds caught Mickey next.

"Whew!" he too thought, but with guard down, so that all in the bus caught the exclamation.

ETIQUETTE required him to explain.

"It's Mickey, the imbecile Mickey! You know—the ward of Talber, the plant geneticist. He's talking to the girl Marta, at the next stop. Wait. Yes—he's taking this bus. In a minute he'll be in here with us!"

"Whew!" mentally exclaimed two other passengers. "Whew" was fashionable that year.

At that moment the airbus began to clear a little ridge, and then everyone caught for himself the phenomenal Mickey waves. In their presence all conventional barriers broke down, and a general thoughtversation began in the bus.

"He's going to the City for the fourth class test," one of the passengers, who had caught that fact, telecast for the others.

"Can you tell me any details, sir?" asked the old lady.

"It's sweet love, madam," was the answer. "He wants to marry his Marta. But he's fifth class, and she's fourth, and the State—" Here the man paused, the better to receive. "Yes," he went on after a moment, "—the State, I've just overcaught, is one arbitrary, two illogical and three cruel. Marriages between inferiors should be permitted, I learn—even between the fourth and fifth classes."

"But they would be breeding inferior children!" objected the old lady. The fact was perfectly obvious, and to men-

tion it allowed a presumption of senility.

"Love, even with us, is still the irrational emotion," telecast one philosophic gentleman who until then had maintained complete privacy. "We can hardly expect, then, that an imbecile at his discharge can be rational under it."

"I get only disconnected phrases," one of the less sensitive thirds modestly ventured. "Can the gentleman of the second class perhaps tell us what they are saying?"

"Yes details," said the old lady looking at her son and speaking, this time, aloud. Her son smiled. The eternal feminine love curiosity, he thought —but he kept his thought well walled.

"I've been getting a fairly clear pattern," he thought to the receptive company. "Mickey aspires to get himself reclassified as a fourth, so he can marry his Marta. That means he must pass the yearly tests. He has already taken the first two, and not done badly, either; but the all-important practical telegetting test still remains, and now, this afternoon in this very airbus, he is to go down to the City to take it. I, for one wish him luck."

"So do I," agreed another. "And then if the State with great kindness will only marry them and send them to some isolated planetoid for a year or two, to use up their excess of power, then, when they return, we might all have more peace."

"Right!" thought another in quick agreement.

"Let's all wish him luck;" thought yet another.

"Details!" spoke the old lady once more. She was not to be put off, her son saw; but then, no doubt, the others too would like to hear. As a second-classer, the most sensitive receiver in the bus, he set himself to teleget the actual word-for-word conversation of the distant two.

He smiled at the first thing he caught.

"HE IS trying to hide his anxiety by teasing her," the man told them. He paused a moment, then, with a thought wave of another quality, meant to carry Mickey's words, he relayed:

"'Well, then I guess there's nothing left but to be re-conditioned'."*

"'No'!" This was with another quality, meant for Marta. "'You wouldn't dare do that to me'!"

* Obviously the power to love is a mental one, and what Mickey refers to here is an elimination of his regard for Marta by some form of hypnosis which will cause him to forget her, and to hold no regard for her in the future. Even in 1940 hypnotists considered this possible. Ed.

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"'But surely you'd want me freed of my misery',"—from Mickey. "'Just think, and try not to be selfish; in five minutes all my lovely memories of you can be removed, all my torturing thoughts erased; and then, and *then*, maybe I'll be fortunate enough to fall in love with some other girl, of my own class'."

"'You're only teasing'."

"'There's a very good looking one over in Area 72-61. I don't think she would have to be urged to go into the "courting" machine with me; in fact, I don't think she'd need any artificial directional stimulation at all'!"

"'Sometimes I could cheerfully strangle you'!" came Marta's highly irrational response to this.

"'That's a very low thing to say'," came from Mickey. "'It's a good thing they don't revise classifications downward'."

At this point the man relaying the conversation stopped speaking. The airbus, toward the end of its long arc, was slowly nearing the ground. Ahead, alone on the landing stage, were the strong figures of the two whose conversation they had just overcaught.

The car touched, the door opened. Everyone inside caught directly the last few words of Marta.

"Good luck, Mickey! Good luck!"

The imbecile Mickey, innocent subject of kilowatts of chatter, entered and found a seat. The car had hardly started to rise when a torrent of thoughtversation burned the air.

"He stifles me!"

"I can't hear myself think!"

"He's making *me* fall in love with Marta!"

"What an animal! Halfway back to the gorilla! Look—he must be nearly two meters tall! And see his hair—blond and wavy. It covers the whole top of his head!"

"See his wide shoulders!"

"Did you catch sight of Marta? The same type, feminine version. They're a pair, all right."

"Such stupid conversation, it was, but such love behind it!"—this from the old lady, whose cerebration was a bit behind.

"It's a good thing he can't catch the thoughts here!" came a more remote observation.

"It would be a better thing if he could wall his own!"

Not one of the passengers was wholly serious, but the philosophic gentleman thought it time for a tactful hint to go easy.

"Are we being quite fair?" he asked with a wave of mild tone. "I too call this Mickey inferior and ugly, but we must not forget that such notions as inferiority and ugliness are only relative in value. I think there is a high probability that this imbecile would have been considered both wise and handsome at a certain stage in human evolution."

"Oh yes, you're right — but you'd have to go pretty far back. Probably as far as the twentieth century. Assuming his genes lie in the direct line."

"I rather think they do," was the considered reply. "You will observe there is no external evidence that the man is a freak, nor does he show any stigmata of degeneration. His strength and proportions, both of body and thought, are extremely good—for his level."

"Tentatively, I should agree with you," thought the second-classer. "He does appear to be one of the few who came down through the Age of Mutations unchanged."

THE thoughtversation went on, interweaving all around and even through its lowly subject, while Mickey

sat gloomily, forehead pressed tightly against the little window, and wished the trip was over.

He was quite opaque to their individual words, but here, as had happened many times before, his woolen perceptions were catching a general *feeling* of what was transpiring, and as always it made him shrink up in his old, worn feelings of inferiority.

There was one bright oasis of relief. He was not ugly and primitive to Marta, the stars be thanked, and he could always escape into thoughts of her. He was well aware that this escape created a disturbance round him. Usually he felt humble and sorry about it, for people were invariably so kind and courteous to him—but sometimes he did not. There were moments when, rebelling at his inescapable nakedness, he was glad he had that effect. It was some small sign of power, however perverse.

He almost felt that way now.

There came the beginning of the old dream. If he were a citizen of the first class, even the second or third; if he could catch lightly other people's thoughts; if he could wall his own; if, and if, then . . . then . . . but there never was an end to this dream. He knew too well it was impossible, even for a dream.

In the next few hours, by the greatest of luck, he might just possibly manage to hoist himself into Class Four; every few years some imbecile did it. That at any rate, would bring him Marta, the greatest happiness of all. It was enough.

But first there was that test. At thought of it, so close, some of his courage oozed away. You must not think less of him for it, for he was no natural hero, but only an imbecile, on whose feeble mind had been overlaid twenty years of conditioning in inferiority.

CHAPTER II

Mickey Takes a Test

FROM the airbus terminal to the Communications Building was only a few steps, and a somewhat more hopeful Mickey was quickly in the outer offices of the Testing Bureau. There was a different robot there today, one he had not seen before, and to his surprise it knew who he was. It ordered, pointing:

"Michael, take the card with your name on it from that rack on the wall. Then follow the instructions you will find on it."

A trifle upset at contact with this mechanism which somehow knew his name, Mickey found his card and turned to the door, intending to read his instructions outside, away from the creation's yellow eyes.

"Mickey!"

He turned back. It was the robot who had spoken—using, this time, his familiar name. It went on, now, in another tone full of kindness.

"You must love her very much, lad."

A little nettled, Mickey flung back:

"How do you know? And what do you know about love, anyway!"

"Your thoughts are not exactly weak," the mechanism said, with a degree of tact. "As you came in I had to cut out a tube."

This was too much.

"Since when have they been making robots that can catch thoughts!" exclaimed Mickey, indignantly. It was outrageous. It was unfair! Telepathic robots! He blew off some steam. (Could it be that he was jealous?)

"I suppose from now on euthanasia will be administered to infant imbeciles as well as the idiots. Why not?—now that they can make robots that catch thoughts. Make robots to take their

places! They'd not only be more useful, but more convenient; you just turn them off and on. Send all fifth class adults to the lethal chamber!"

"Mickey, you're being irrational," the robot said gently. "I didn't call you back to quarrel with you, but just to give you a word of advice. Believe me, I am competent to give it. Right now you are bitter, very emotional, very tense. Relax. You must. In your state you'd flunk the test even with a second-class brain. Give yourself a chance. Loosen up! Now go, and good luck."

A pep talk now, from this robot! He was always getting surprises, most of them unpleasant.

Mickey somehow came to mumble his thanks and went out. Ordinarily one did not thank robots for a service, he knew—but then one ordinarily did not meet robots who caught thoughts and gave advice. What was the world coming to, anyway, when side by side were men who could not teleget and robots that could! Why didn't they improve the men first?

The whole think was just depressing.

THAT ability to read thoughts—it was so important. When very young he had thought it merely a decorative accomplishment, but that was an infantile error of judgment, for well he knew, now, that it was the fundamental need of every citizen, the thing, like a pair of hands which made him useful. The degree of one's ability to teleget was, as a result, the factor given most weight in the allocation of class ratings.

Safe in the hall, Mickey looked at his card. It bore these words:

"Go to the Waverly Plaza and sit on one of the benches reserved. Relax. A message, directed to you personally, will be sent at intervals, faint at first but in regularly increasing intensities. If and when you get it, do as it directs. If you have not gotten any message in one hour, go home. All results will be broadcast shortly thereafter by radio-print."

Well, that was clear, and it was just what he had expected. All these practical tests followed the same pattern. Candidates were sent to a selected place in the open; they would sit there relaxed, attempting to achieve optimum receptivity to the messages sent. Once every few years some lucky oaf with a varying threshold would get. All he, Mickey, had to do was be the lucky one. It was as simple as that.

Waverly Plaza was just down the avenue, and when Mickey arrived there he found five of the benches roped off and identified with a placard stating they were reserved for the test. Of the five only four were occupied, with one person on each—all men, short, skinny and bald-headed ones of normal appearance, quite unlike himself. Feeling unusually self-conscious, he took the empty bench. The injunction on the card was to relax, and that too was the advice of the surprising robot. So—he tried.

He tried, but his brain buzzed on, kept trying, but thoughts kept popping out of the corners of his mind, tried harder, but found himself tense; and then he got mad. Here, out in the open public, in the most important moment of his life, he was expected to relax! A whole nation of psychologists, each one a mental marvel—and they still were so stupid as to expect him, imbecile and inferior, to relax at such a moment, efficiently obedient to some words on a little piece of paper! They might as well ask a man to lift himself by his bootstraps—whatever a bootstrap was!

Poor bungling Mickey, always functioning at his low level! He should not

have seen Marta just before the test. He should not have ridden in that depressing airbus. He shouldn't have gotten upset at the kindly robot. And now he certainly should not have called his superiors stupid. He had hardly gotten well worked up when a nurse appeared who took his pulse and gave him a small subcutaneous injection. She did the same with the other four candidates. The all-important relaxation then began to steal over him.

MUCH more calmly, after that, he waited—waited for those sub-microscopic electromagnetic waves that somehow got stopped in normal people's craniums and miraculously were converted into word-thoughts. He of course did not hope to get actual words, but he might get some more or less definite *impression* of the message, something on which he could act. He was sure he knew how it would be. Marta, who was a nurse in the Area hospital, had once arranged an informal test for him. The resident chief of psychiatrists, nose to nose, had telecast to him at his maximum intensity. Mickey thereupon had stuck out his tongue. The experiment was a tremendous success. That had been the order! But he hadn't caught any words at all, and later he confided to Marta that he had stuck out his tongue only because at that moment he felt like it.

It was all very wonderful and depressing. But maybe, with tremendous luck, he might again get the inclination to do just what his message directed.

But how the devil was he to filter out his own particular inclination from all the other thoughts crisscrossing through his noddle in that public place? he wondered.

He worried. He waited. He got nothing. He could imagine a psychiatrist focussing on him from a window high up in some nearby building. For some reason the man looked like that other one, and again he had the same impulse, to stick out his tongue. But he resisted the impulse this time. He was dumb, but not that dumb.

Suddenly he remembered that it was a blank mind that gave optimum receptivity. He shut his eyes and struggled to maintain one. His success was not notable. Thoughts kept sneaking in from all sides. But this was to be expected; the incapacity was one of his limitations as an inferior. The two upper classes had remarkable powers of control. He remembered Talber, his guardian, once: for twenty-eight hours by the clock he had sat and stared at a number of little symbols arranged in a swastika on a piece of paper, and in all that time he hardly moved.

Mickey decided, tentatively, that his chief trouble lay in the unusual intensity of his thoughts. That nurse should have had sense enough to give him a triple shot.

A QUARTER hour passed, then another. Mickey still got nothing. Not even, any more, the inclination to stick out his tongue. He suffered. Marta was in the balance!

His message should be getting much stronger; the time was half gone! It was but slight relief to open his eyes and see that none of the other imbeciles had left their seats.

Thoughts of Marta, and the unbearable consequences if he should fail, now began to obsess him. His lovely, most desirable Marta! If he were a first-classer he might, at that very moment, be able to pick up thoughts of encouragement from her, for she was not more than ten kilometers away. Again that "if."

The afternoon sun lowered; the hand on his wrist watch crept to the three-quarter's mark, and Mickey still got no signal. He began to feel panicky. Surely, if he were to get anything at all in the fifteen minutes remaining, there should be some feeling in his head, however faint. But not at all. More precious minutes passed, nothing came, and his panic grew.

When there were six minutes left one of the men on the other benches got up, a look of great excitement on his face. Lucky man! Straight back in the direction of the Communications Building he went, the envy of all the tortured candidates who remained.

Desperately, then, contrary to all the rules, Mickey strained to catch his message. He began to have the feeling that there *was* something; something for him; not so much a message as a kind of feeling that he should do something. He strove, every muscle tense, to get the message. For interminable periods it would fade away; then it would return, seemingly a trifle stronger, but he could not make it out. Suddenly the image of the robot back in the office appeared before his eyes, so real that he felt he could reach out and touch it. Could it be that he was being told to return to the robot? He hesitated, uncertain. He knew very well that he might have self-suggested the thought, himself its originator, and that if this were so, to move would reinforce the erroneous idea, destroying all chance of receiving the proper one.

Mickey resisted, but the image periodically returned. It was all that came through. Only two minutes left! Beads of sweat stood out on his face; he sat in agony, dominated by the visual image of the robot and his hesitation to go to him.

One minute left! He waited a few seconds longer, then of its own volition his body got up and started back to the building and the robot. He did not see the agonized and envious glances which followed him.

HE ran. The people in the elevator looked at him compassionately, and this frightened him. The robot stood exactly as in his image, its yellow eyes on Mickey from the second he entered the room. Suddenly abashed now, Mickey faltered, not knowing what further to say or do. And the longer he hesitated, the more helpless he became.

A minute passed. Then the robot spoke—a little sadly, the young man thought.

"Go home, Mickey," it said. "Go home."

Mickey stumbled out the door. He had failed, he was sure of it. The tone of the robot, the faces in the elevator, the incompleteness of the message—if, indeed, the robot was part of the message—all added up to failure. Now what were he and Marta to do!

Eleven kilometers out was the villa where he and Talber, the plant genius, lived. He walked there.

Talber had caught him from afar, and stood waiting, an old, thin, quiet figure, outside the first floor level. He of course would have caught every thought of Mickey's for many minutes past.

"Yes, Mickey," he said gently, in answer to his ward's unspoken question; "they've come through." He led the way up a flight and back into his own large living room. On a table in one corner stood the radio-printer. Yards of tape lay piled in a plastic basket by its side, and the apparatus was even then busy adding more, as another item came in.

Rapidly Talber scanned the recent output, till his eyes rested on a single

name. That person, that one imbecile, had passed the practical test, and was to be allowed to go into the fourth class. Talber pointed to the name.

It was not Mickey's.

CHAPTER III

Talber's Death-Visitation

FOR a moment Mickey stood looking at it, then dumbly, emotion unmanning him, he turned and hurried for the one spot, the only one in all the world, where he could be decently private, his thoughts and emotions his own.

He made straight for it, in the rear of a cluttered storeroom outhouse at the edge of the grounds, and stepped within its magic little square and lay down. In that place he was naked no longer.

He had built the little square when a boy, and thereafter always, when some childhood tragedy overtook him, had run there with his sorrow. He called it just his "place." A helpless little outcast in an inimical world, it afforded in small part the protection of a mother.

His place was nothing more than an area of perhaps a square meter on the floor, around which with immense effort he had lain a thin, half-meter-high wall of the extremely heavy brickets, an industrial by-product of matter partly stripped of its electrons. Such brickets had the power of stopping thought waves, and were incorporated sometimes in the walls of laboratories where delicate experiments were the rule. The tones in his low walls he had found in the storeroom, left over from an intallation in Talber's private laboratory across the garden. As far as Mickey knew, his use of them was his own secret.

He lay curled up there now and let the tears run unashamed down his cheeks. The world had not changed for him; he was still the helpless inferior, at the mercy of a host of laws and personal incapacities which stood forever in his way. One thing, one thing only, he desired with all the force of his being, and that was Marta. And now a stupid test had stolen his chance of having her.

Minutes passed. Mickey heard footsteps and looked over the wall. Talber was coming. Again defeat! His retreat was discovered!

When he drew near Talber answered his thought.

"I've known about your place," he said smiling gently. "From the day you built it. I suppose I should not have allowed you to appropriate the brickets for your own use, but perhaps I am weak, for the thoughts which reached me were those of such a happy little boy, struggling mightily with the great weight of the pieces of the place of refuge he was building."

Tears came again to Mickey's eyes. Talber was so kind. He had always been like a father to him. He was—or had been, until his retirement a number of years ago—one of the dozen most outstanding scientists alive, and yet in spite of his still ceaseless activities and prolonged and all-demanding thinking he had always found time to ease, in little ways, his imbecile ward's difficult road. He was much less like a guardian than a father. Mickey loved him very much.

THE young man got to his feet, and Talber laid one hand on his shoulder.

"Don't mind too much, son," he said. "You will try again next year, and then, perhaps, you will have better luck."

"Next year!" exclaimed Mickey, all

his feelings finding vent in the words. "Another year without Marta! And then that heartless test again!"

"It is not impassable," was the old man's gentle answer. "Performance always varies. I know for a fact that you are close to the line of division. You did not pass the test today, but you might have tomorrow, when the tremendous number of factors which combine to make up your performance curve would vary a little. I think, perhaps, with special work, I might be able to prime you enough to take you across, next year. It will take time. I'll have to study the rhythm of receptivity natural to you, and experiment so as to have you artificially at optimum on the day you take the test. That would be legal, I think."

"You are very kind, sir," Mickey said, but he felt no real joy. That year would be en eternity, both for himself and Marta. And there was still a big "perhaps."

Talber smiled again. He said:

"It may be, if your passion keeps up, the State will *make* you pass the test. Your thoughts of her cause quite a disturbance, you know. People say your intensity is vulgar, even disgusting, and of course it is to some—but there are a great many others to whom your are a—um—stimulation. People —older people—people who should be at work—they find themselves with their husbands or wives, holding hands! You are a real disturbance, but at the same time unquestionably a social asset."

"Please don't jest with me, sir," Mickey said.

"But I'm not," was Talber's immediate answer, "though of course this does have its humorous aspect. I'll tell you something you don't know. There is a member of the Council who has been privately agitating to have a special measure passed, so you can marry your Marta, and go far away with her and wear off the peak of your intensity curve. That should be good news. So far the chief opposition has come from an influential member who, one, lives near here, two, has lost the affection of his young wife, and three, has recently found her showing more regard. This may be a coincidence; I don't know; but here clearly is a situation which should give you hope.

"I do not jest, Mickey. I tell you this, thinking it may cheer you a little."

Perhaps Mickey should have been cheered, but with imbecilic perversity the news only depressed him the more.

"Well, I'm sorry if I've been a disturbance to you, sir," he managed. "I—I"

"But I rather like it, son," Talber said, interrupting. "Anyway, I'm in my laboratory most of the time, where your thoughts can't reach me."

MICKEY sat on the edge of the wall, still in gloom. Talber said, at length:

"You certainly do love her. Have you considered having yourself remotionally re-oriented? You needn't go on this way. It may seem unthinkable now, to have every trace of Marta erased from your mind, but once it's done it will be as though she never existed. In the same trip you could be re-pointed to any girl whom you may select from among those willing and eligible. It's much the most rational thing to do."

Exactly what he had teased Marta with!

Talber said at once:

"All right, all right. But I think it may be your hard luck that the State does no forcing."

Mickey looked full in his guardian's eyes.

"Am I so very like my mother?" he asked suddenly.

"Very much, lad," Talber said. "Even more robust, physically. I knew her well; I even had the opportunity to study her. She was unquestionably of the direct line, untouched by the Age of Mutations. Your father was a most promising scientist, in the first class from his youth. He thought her very beautiful, and I can say for myself that she was. Of course few others thought so."

"And everyone looked down on her," Mickey said gloomily; "just like me. There must be a very strong tendency for human beings to dislike, or even hate, those who are different."

"There is!" was the answer. "It is an elemental instinct, and runs all through the animal kingdom. It may not be in accord with the philosophy which prates of universal love, but it is biologically rational. Throughout all evolution the prime urge of every type is to reproduce, protect, and make ascendant its own kind."

Mickey sighed. Talber said:

"So Marta will be stopping by when she leaves to go on duty."

Mickey had had that thought.

"Yes," he said. " I hope we won't disturb you."

"I'll be in my laboratory, quite undisturbable," the elderly scientist said. "I had better go there now. Console yourself, son, with the thought that next year you'll get up. If I live, we'll work it."

"But of course you'll live!" Mickey exclaimed. Several times lately this odd thought had been expressed by Talber. "You're only one five; barring accidents you have at least twenty years more."

"I have the feeling I am going to die," said the old man with a distant look, as if the wall of the storeroom were not there. "It is probably irrational, but there is always a chance it is a true prescience. You wouldn't understand, Mickey—you could hardly get through your relativity—but there do occur phenomena like prescience and the death-visitation—resultants of rare interrelations of time and energy beyond precise formulation and prediction. It may be, some time, that one combination will tear the world apart."

HE LOOKED back at the young man.

"You have not forgotten my instructions?" he asked.

"Oh no, sir," answered Mickey. "Upon the failure of all attempts to revive you, I will do exactly as you have ordered."

"I wish I could tell you more, Mickey," said the old man sincerely, "but—your guard is very imperfect."

"I know," was the gloomy answer.

"Just throw that switch."

"Yes, sir."

Slowly, musing deeply, Talber left. Mickey followed a little behind, and through the softening light of the sunset saw the master enter his laboratory. The instinct to explore was strong. Many master scientists, on retiring from the public service, worked out their lives in such private laboratories.

Talber's place was rather unusual, in that only about two meters of it showed above the level of the ground. There would be steps leading downward. Standing there, Mickey wondered what research it was that the old scientist pursued so diligently, through such long and exhausting hours, in the unknown interior of that building. Something connected with his great specialty, plant genesis, without doubt. He Mickey, had never been inside. That was forbidden.

If Mickey's place in the social scheme

was of the humblest, he at least had few responsibilities. Under the somewhat loose guardianship arrangement he did all the lowly jobs around the villa, spending most of his time grooming the trees and grounds, and, particularly, looking after the small plot of flower-vegetables which now were all that remained of the plant scientist's outdoor experiments. There was nothing that had to be done at this late hour of the day, so Mickey went back to his place.

One more year! One more whole year to wait!

The afternoon sun dipped low and went under. Twilight came on apace, and the familiar objects over the walls of Mickey's retreat took on dim and half real lines. Sunk in his gloomy thoughts, quite without appetite, Mickey waited. Soon he would get up and go down the road, and there wait for Marta. Perhaps he would even be able to feel her coming. Sometimes he could.

For some minutes he lay curled there, exhausted by the emotional drain of the day, and now, at last, physically passive. For a time he dozed. It grew much darker; it was time to go. He stood up, stretched, and slowly stepped over the low walls of his retreat.

He had, then, suddenly, a most peculiar feeling and on its heels came a tremendous shock.

In the middle of the narrow passage, not two meters away, stood the figure of Talber. Dim as the light was, he saw the figure did not move, not by the stirring of a hair; it stood like a man frozen, and a fixed flood of dark blood spread down over the face and chest. That! Dark blood, fixed motionless in its gushing flow!

For one long second Mickey was a man frozen himself, then, sharp as the crack of a million volts, he understood.

This was not Talber himself. It was his death-visitation.

Mickey raised his arm, and the figure vanished.

CHAPTER IV

The Men in the Laboratory

AS IT did, every single hair on Mickey's body rose on end in a tidal wave of fear. This was no trick of television, no impossible ghost, no visual hallucination, but an authentic death-visitation, one such as Talber had mentioned only a few minutes before! Talber lay dead somewhere!—but not before he had managed, in the last wrenching second of remaining life, to appear in terrifying testimony of that fact!

Mickey stood motionless, every nerve tingling, eyes still on the space where the figure had been. Here and there, all over the Earth, from time immemorial, occasional men had experienced this phenomenon, but the lock of its secret, deep in the symbols of new space-time theory, had never yet been picked. Yet he, Mickey, the imbecile who could not catch a thought, was one who could catch this!

That wound. Could it be murder? But murder, even lesser crime, was now all but unknown. There were only the very rare excesses of undetected insanity.

The old scientist's head had been bent. His face was turned oddly to one side, with a peculiar tortured expression on it . . .

With an effort Mickey rallied his wits and a little courage. He would of course have to go look for Talber. Without doubt he was in the laboratory. If he were dead, the ban on his entering was automatically lifted, surely; if alive, that happiness would sustain

Mickey through any possible punishment.

He hurried to the side entrance. Across the little garden, dim in the fading twilight, rose the low, ivy-clad sides of the sunken laboratory. Trembling a little, he tiptoed down the flower-banked path to its only door, and listened carefully there for some time. The silence within seemed complete. He ventured a timid knock, but that brought no response. More boldly, then, but with extreme care, he lifted the latch and pushed the door inward.

He could just make out the first few steps in a stairway which led downward and was at once lost in darkness. The silence remained unbroken. If Talber —or anyone—was down there, there was no sign.

MICKEY returned to the storeroom and got a flash, and in its bright ray he saw that the steps went down for perhaps two meters, then turned off at a right angle to the side. As quietly as he could, he began to slip down.

At the turn he found they led to a wide hallway walled and floored with ordinary builder's plastic. Continuing down and ahead, his darting beam picked out a series of doors which opened into the hallway on one side. All that his beam reached were closed. He tiptoed past the first two, but at a doorway on the other side, opposite the third, he stopped. Some feeling seemed to hold him there, as if that was the place he should enter. Obedient to the feeling, he inched inward the door.

Before him lay a large room with a high ceiling, in area and position corresponding to the part of the building projecting above ground. It was a working laboratory. Flasks, chemicals, and unfamiliar physical and chemical equipment of all kinds stood on tables or lay in glistening rows in air-tight cabinets along the walls. He entered, darting his ray everywhere.

In a far corner the beam caught and held on a familiar and well-loved figure. It was Talber. He was standing motionless, straight up against the wall, his back to Mickey but his head and cheek turned; and there was a peculiar set to his body.

Mickey called to him. There was no response, either of word or movement. Dreadfully, he approached the man. His head, he saw now, was at one of the tiny windows which looked out into the garden. Fresh blood gleamed along the side of his face.

Overcoming his dread Mickey laid a hand on Talber's body. As he did so there was a slight ripping sound and the man slpiped all the way to the floor and lay motionless. Kneeling, his ear to Talber's bloody chest, Mickey listened for a heartbeat. There was none. Talber was dead.

Dead—and he had been standing erect, exactly as Mickey had seen him in the death visitation!

On his temple was a jagged wound, identical with that on the temple of the other, and on his face, too, was the same agonized expression. He had been standing at that little window, death at his very elbow, as if trying with a last mighty effort to summon or notify Mickey.

It had been a frantic effort, Mickey thought, for otherwise he could not possibly have caught the collar of his smock in the window hook.

But this was more than death. It looked very much like murder! Murder! The very word in that age was almost unknown!

MICKEY picked up the slight body and hurried with it back through the hallway and up the flight of steps leading to the garden. Night had closed

in, and a huge golden moon lit his way to the Villa. Up in Talber's living room he laid the limp body carefully on a long couch. He ran at once to the medicine cabinet, found there the standard gland compound which so often had fanned an undetectable spark of life to a strong glow, and rapidly, in a vein inside the elbow, injected the few drops prescribed. He watched hopefully for some sign of returning life. He watched vainly.

There was a soft sound of footsteps behind him, and he turned to find Marta, an unfamiliar expression of anxiety on her face.

"Mickey!" she cried. "I felt there was something!"

In brief phrases Mickey explained what had happened. Marta, as a nurse, knew at once what was to be done.

"We must get him to the hospital," she said, "and right away. If his death was caused only by that temple injury, there's more than a chance that they can bring him back. Run and get out the car," she ordered. "Hurry!"

Mickey darted out to the little hangar and quickly was skimming Talber's two-place aircar along the driveway, just off the ground. He had no sooner jumped out than Marta appeared at the door, bearing, herself, the slight body of the dead man. Mickey received it, placed it carefully in the passenger's seat, and then would have hopped into the other one himself if Marta had not objected.

"No, Mickey, I'll take him," she said. "I know the inside track there, and it's nearly time for me to go on duty, anyway. You stay here and watch the laboratory. Heavens knows who or what might be in it, to have done this. It does look like murder. I'll report it at the hospital."

She stepped into the pilot's seat. Humming gently, the car rose, pointed straight over the rising moon, and darted upward. Mickey watched it for a moment, then turned and stepped into the garden.

Just ahead, leaf-wrapped and mysterious in the moonlight, rose the low walls of the laboratory. Now, because of what had just happened, Mickey saw it through a lens of fear. Murder had just been committed there. The murderer might still be inside.

For the first time Mickey remembered Talber's instructions in the event of his death. He was to throw the knife-switch he would find in a little box on the wall inside the laboratory door. Now Talber was dead, but it was too soon to carry out his injunction. There was a chance that the life of his organs continued, so that the reviving technique, with its blood transfusions and the mechanical operation of the heart and lungs, could bring him back. He would have to hear unsuscitatable death pronounced by the physicians, first.

The dark, silent laboratory fascinated him, seemed to draw him. It was as if were the unlike pole of a magnetic field, attracting him in spite of the repulsion of the like pole, his fear. The murderer might still be there. Dared he go in and have a look?

HE STILL carried his flash, but he ought to have some kind of a weapon. He was strong enough to handle a dozen normal unarmed men—but the murderer might be armed. There was nothing on the premises, he knew; small ray and bullet projectors had not been used since the Age of Mutations.

He felt a considerable urge to go in at once, but he resisted it and, standing there, concocted a weapon. He would use an energy outlet from the storeroom. This, taking broadcast power

from the air, and stepping it up to a killing amperage, would provide him with a fully adequate weapon at close quarters. He would hold out the exposed ends of the wires.

He found at once the unit he wanted. It occupied a space of about half a cubic meter, and though it would have been quite heavy to an ordinary man, he carried it easily enough. Rapidly he checked and adjusted it, then, carefully holding the two deadly live ends well away from him, he retraced his steps to the laboratory door.

The urge to enter was still strong, but he stopped there, greatly afraid. And for good reason. For the thousandth time, realization of his inferiority swept over him. What chance would he, an imbecile, have against a normal! Any normal! Every one of them was a genius, relative to himself. All his life normals had thought faster and more accurately and to better purpose than he; they seemed to know everything, and were able to use their knowledge so quickly and in so many unexpected ways. The murderer, if he were below, would surely catch his thoughts, however well he managed to wall them. No—he decided—he would *not* go in.

But Mickey, as it turned out, was not the one making decisions in that silent garden. A moment later—he could not have explained why—he changed his mind. He would go down, but about one thing he'd be terribly careful, and that was his thoughts. He would not think. He would not! By making a great effort he could blank his mind for a few minutes, he knew. He would do that now.

He did it before taking a step, and maintaining the state pushed open the door and listened. Hearing nothing, he as silently as possible slipped down the dark steps. He was not going to use his flash unless necessary. Darkness would be an ally. Normals at least could not see in the dark.

Slowly he felt his way down the hall. The darkness was like a solid. When he came to the door of the room where he had discovered the dead Talber, he found it a little ajar, and he couldn't for the life of him remember whether or not he had closed it after him, when he left. Then suddenly he cursed himself. This was thinking! He had to keep his mind a blank!

HE ENTERED. He half noted—trying not to experience anything sharply—that a faint light lay diffused through the room from the several tiny windows fronting on the garden. Awkwardly, energy outlet hanging from his left forearm, flash in the hand of that arm and the wires in his other hand, he advanced into the room. It seemed as empty as before. He felt his way to the place he had found Talber, brushing and bumping against dim objects on the way.

He had come to find a murderer, but now, for some reason, he was at a loss what to do next. He risked using his flash. A small pool of blood, fresh and still gleaming in the light of the beam, lay on the floor in the place where Talber had stood in death. Small puddles led to a large oven on the other side of the room—one of the kind used by metallurgists. He went to the oven. There the blood trail ended, or rather began. He found large splotches on the side of the door. Cautiously, his live wires ready, Mickey hooked the door open with his right elbow and looked in.

There was much more blood inside—but no more, anywhere he could see, outside. Did this mean that Talber had been attacked while inside the oven? Why should he be inside, and why attacked there? Was his death

wound an accident after all? Surely not.

He looked again about the laboratory, this time searchingly, with full use of the light. He saw no one but there was someone there! A voice came to him—a quiet voice with a resonance much like his own—and it spoke his name!

"Mickey."

A terrific scare shot through him; he swept his light everywhere, looking for the owner of the voice; his thought guard went hopelessly down. He could find no one at all. But again sounded the voice.

"Mickey."

It was terrifying.

Summoning all his courage, Mickey tremblingly called out:

"Where are you?"

His own voice, echoing through the ray-pierced blackness, frightened him further. After a measurable pause an answer came back.

"Here, Mickey."

THE tone was smooth and attractive, and seemed to bear, deep within it, a trace of amusement. Mickey had the feeling that the unknown invisible was playing with him, as a cat with a mouse.

"Step out, I can't see you," he managed to say.

"All right, Mickey," the voice purred on. "I'll step out, but you will not be able to see me, for your eyes are closing. Yes, your eyes are closing, Mickey, and you're growing very sleepy," the voice went on soothingly. "Very sleepy. You would not hurt me with that current you carry. You like me. I am your friend. You are growing very sleepy; that apparatus is heavy, and you want to switch it off and set it down—don't you, Mickey?"

"Yes," Mickey answered.

He did feel sleepy, lulled by the suggestion of that soothing voice. There was no longer any murderer for whom he was looking, but only the sensation of fatigue. He switched off the outlet and laid it on the floor.

A figure stepped into view from behind a nearby cabinet, but this his heavy eyelids did not let him see.

"So sleepy," came the soothing words. "Your eyes are closed . . . you can't open them . . . you can't put off sleeping any longer . . . you are lying down. It is so pleasant, isn't it, Mickey?"

"Yes, so pleasant," Mickey said, lying on the floor.

He did not even know what had happened. He lay there hypnotized, and did not see the figure which came forward and examined him with a curiosity which, had it been observed, would have been surprising.

CHAPTER V

Buried Alive

MICKEY felt he had "slept" for only a moment when consciousness began to return. His first thought was that he lay helpless in the grip of some terrible nightmare. He was being strangled and could not move! He gasped for breath, strained, strained more and more violently, but it was as if his whole body was rigidly confined. He seemed awake, but he could not move his body! His ears rang—and he felt the grate of grit between his teeth. Grit!—and he could not even move his jaws to spit it out! Once more he strained, with all his strength, and then something seemed to give, and he had the sickening sensation of falling.

The falling was real! He crashed heavily on a hard surface, and again lost consciousness.

This time he came to slowly. As his mind cleared he found that he now could move his body. There was still grit or dirt in his mouth, a lot of it, and some in his nose, too. He spat it out, and opened his eyes. As he did so his eyeballs were seared with pain, and he knew, then, that the dirt was in his eyes, too. He was numb all over, but with an effort he found his eyelids and pulled them out, to let his eyes water and wash the dirt away.

Slowly the pain lessened but there was no light. He could not have imagined such darkness. The surface on which he lay was hard; it felt like plastic. Scattered over it he could feel large clumps and piles of freshly broken earth. He had no idea where he was.

He got stiffly to his knees and groped around. He seemed to be in a wide, paved area, irregularly spattered with mounds of large stones and loose earth. He shouted for help, but only echoes came back to mock his ears. Apparently, from the sound, the place where he found himself was enclosed; the air, too, was still and musty, as if it had been confined there for a long time. He was terribly afraid that he might be blind. It was either that or he was in an underground cavern. And if it were a cavern, that meant only one thing—he must be somewhere in the so-called City of the Troglodites, that vast, underground, labyrinthine maze where had lived, fought, and died one almost forgotten human sub-type, spawn of the fearful Age of Mutation.

Suddenly there came to him memory of all that had happened before—the death-visitation and finding of Talber, his investigation of the laboratory, and the smooth voice which had twice repeated his name. He had no memory of anything after that. Apparently he had been hypnotized—but why? How had he come to this place? Was it a dream that he had awakened once, unable to move, his nose and mouth filled with dirt? He remembered very clearly a sickening fall. If he had been buried alive somewhere above one of the caverns, and then the earth of the cavern roof had given way and allowed him to fall—that would explain some part of his present predicament.

EXCITED by this idea he got to his feet and moved forward more boldly, but he had not taken two steps when he stumbled and fell sprawling. Groping, his hands found that it was another pile of loose earth that had brought him down. But one hand found something else—something which he flung from him with a cry of terror. It was—at least, to his brief touch it felt like—a detached human hand!

A moment later, when he had recovered from the shock, he was not so sure what it was; but the memory kept bothering him, so he set out to re-find the thing. On hands and knees, feeling over every inch of the surface for some distance in the direction he had thrown it, he searched.

Eventually he found it again. He had not been mistaken. It *was* a human hand, flexible, still warm, and—wet! Deliberately, this time, he flung it away far into the night which lay solid all around. He was filled with a sudden great urge to get out of that place.

He pushed to his feet again. He would first have to find a wall. Carefully he picked his way forward, trying his best to maintain a straight line. He came to one, but it was at a surprising distance. It was smooth and flat to his touch, like the floor, and it extended straight out to each side in the darkness. Choosing the left side, he followed it.

He found at once he was not going to

have smooth going. There were obstacles underfoot. His hands groped over the irregular and rusted surfaces of metal machinery, and his feet took him uncertainly over scattered tins, broken pieces of construction work, and other rubbish.

At first contact with this rubbish his suspicion of before became a certainty. He was in the City of the Troglodites, and nowhere else. The plastic floor and walls, the tins, the decayed machinery and rubbish—these were the mute and dark-buried remains of the terrific struggle to survive of that unfortunate breed, driven deep into the earth in the terrible Age of Mutations.*

He was heartened by the realization of where he was. The underground city had exits. True, they were barred and locked, but there were a few places where entrance had been forced by the more adventurous of the small boys of the prevailing race in their brief "savage" period. Mickey had been one of these offenders, and his period had lasted longer than those of the others, and as a result he knew—or at least he once knew—several small portions of the network near the villa fairly well. If, by luck, he was in that neighborhood, he would get out somehow, he was sure.

THERE was no use shouting any more, for he would never be heard; nor could anyone on the surface get his thought waves, for there were not only a hundred feet of more of earth lying interposed, but, in many places, an additional built-in roof of thought wave-damping material. He groped his way with some slight confidence along the wall he had found, determined to follow it wherever it went. If his strength held out, this procedure would eventually lead him to one of the exits, where he could make his predicament known.

He seemed to have fallen into a very large open area, for he had to move along the wall for several minutes before it made a right angle. He followed the new wall without hesitation, sometimes coming to stretches where there were no obstacles and then making good speed. This wall turned presently at another right angle. There, the difference in the sounds of the echoes, when he made test cries, told him he had come to an avenue, one of the long, wide passageways that connected the larger areas. He many times passed by open spaces in the wall which would lead off, he knew, into a maze of small cubicles—the work rooms and sleeping

*In that Age new mutations of the human line, produced artificially and almost simultaneously in outlaw laboratories all over the world, had engaged in a complex frightful war of extermination, the older types hating the new with an intensity scarcely conceivable, and the new types reciprocating just as fiercely in kind. The struggle to dominate lasted many centuries; victory swung temporarily from one type to another, determined by brief working alliances and sudden treacheries, the irregular development of new lethal weapons, and, especially, the successful adaptation of new mutation characteristics. In one period whole cities and communication networks were built underground, sometimes in many levels. Life fought hard and died horribly.

Out of that welter of feud and blood had emerged the type of Talber, superior cousins of the direct line, of which Mickey and Marta were apparently good specimens. And born of fear in that terrible age was the chief guiding principle of the modern State—a strict proscription against all meddling with the mechanisms which produce mutations.

The feeling against mutations slept deep, these days, because the present type, with its telepathic faculty, was far and away best fitted to survive, and was in no faintest danger from the infrequent birth of individuals of the formerly dominant line. There can be no hate where there is no fear.

Mickey knew all this well. When young, in blue moments resulting from his out-caste condition, he had sometimes wondered if he might not be a mutation. He was not one; he had been thoroughly examined a number of times; but his secret childhood fears had left him unable to hear the word "mutation," or even think of the dreadful Age of Mutations, without experiencing odd crawling feelings in his viscera.—Ed.

quarters of the exterminated race.

For what seemed hours he continued on in this way, stumbling occasionally, often barking his shins, and growing, in spite of his exertions, stiffer and sorer all the way. The fall from the ceiling of the cavern, while breaking no bones and doing no major damage, seemed to have wrenched him all through.

At last came a moment of triumph, when his straining eyes beheld, ahead, an ever-so-faint lessening of the night. Eagerly increasing his speed he quickly reached the end of the passage he was in. He found his way blocked by massive doors, made of heavy metal plates. Through thin cracks between the plates he saw a section of brightly moonlit landscape.

To his joy the scene seemed familiar. Rapidly he backed a few steps and went through a narrow open space into a small room on one side of the passage. If he was right, there should be an exit, blocked by a large stone, in the angle of that room.

It was there! In a few minutes he was out in the bright moonlight, free.

CHAPTER VI

"You Are a Murderer!"

IT WAS well toward dawn, Mickey judged, for the moon, silver now, and its normal size, rode lightly far in the other side of the heavens. He was only a kilometer from home. About him, softly etched, lovely in the moonlight, familiar little villas nestled sleepily in their landscaped terraces and hobby gardens.

Their occupants were not all asleep, however, for in most of them lights gleamed softly from the upper windows. It was a characteristic of the type dominant, that their waking-sleeping cycle no longer held at twenty-four hours; while it varied with individuals, it averaged close to thirty for waking, and ten for sleep. At all times the larger part of the population was awake.

Now that he was free Mickey began to be beset by thoughts of Marta and how she had made out with the dead Talber. The hospital was close by, but he was so dirty and smeared with blood that he decided to strike back to the villa where he lived and inquire from there.

He was extremely curious about the laboratory. He knew now that he had fallen into the underground city from a place close to it, if not actually from beneath it, and he kept remembering the first part of what happened on his return there the second time, and the unknown, smooth voice, rather like his own, which had spoken his name. He could not wait to find out what had happened. With long strides he started back along the velvet surfaced road.

There were an unusual number of lighted villas, he began to notice, and an unusual amount of aerial acitvity overhead. As he came to his own neighborhood he saw that it was the villa, or the laboratory, that was the focus of this activity. Aircars kept heading toward the spot, just over a low ridge, where it lay—more than came from there. Murder still was news! He passed a few people on the road, headed in that direction. They looked at him curiously, and behaved, he thought, as if they were afraid of him. He couldn't blame them, for he knew he looked like a murderer himself, and an insane one at that. His fragmentary thoughts would not be exactly reassuring—full of blood, death-visitations, murder, burial alive, and such smaller details as a detached human hand.

As he topped the ridge he saw that

hundreds of people thronged the garden and walks of the estate, amid a confusion of moving hand-flash beams. To one side lay the aircars most had come in. On the other, in the place where the laboratory had been, lay a ragged, gaping hole.

Mickey without pausing took this in. It was exciting, but he half expected it.

But at once he saw another, very disagreeable thing. The crowd stilled, and every individual in it turned with face in his direction, eyes on him alone. He groaned. It was the same old thing. His thought waves, striking powerfully in a direct line from the top of the ridge, were having their usual dominating effect.*

Well, he was used to that. He could not help it, and had nothing to fear. Tonight his thoughts were at least startlingly different.

THE crowd remained hushed and motionless as he approached, and the people nearest shrunk to the side and made way for him. Able to see the wreckage of the laboratory better, then, he found that the structure had been entirely blown up, except for a small part near the entrance. He turned to the nearest man and asked respectfully:

"Can you tell me what happened here, sir?"

"You can see," was the answer he got. There was a look on the man's face which Mickey could not read. For that matter the single attitude of the entire crowd struck him as odd. One after another their beams were now arching up and holding on him mercilessly.

"Don't be alarmed at my appearance," Mickey said. "Something happened to me; I'm not sure what; but I suspect I was in the laboratory when it happened. But I'm awfully anxious to know about Talber. Could they revive him, do you know?"

The crowd stood like a colossal group statue, Mickey the unvarying focus of every eye. The man answered coldly:

"He is dead. For the second time. They are again trying to bring him back."

Mickey gaped.

"But—but I don't understand. Why is he dead twice? Please tell me, sir!"

"You don't know?"

Mickey saw that the man did not trust him.

"No, sir— I don't know anything about it!" he protested. "You catch that, don't you? You all can tell that," he added, addressing the people near him with some anxiety.

The man kept his eyes on Mickey for a moment, then he said:

"When Talber came alive after the first time he ran here, quite out of his mind, and it was he who blew up the laboratory. He died again at once."

Mickey could only gape at the man. His words brought nothing but confusion. A second man, on the other side, began to speak to him, and automatically he turned and faced him.

"Tell us how he died the first time," were his words.

Mickey knew then what was in their minds. He was supposed to have committed the murder! The realization paralyzed him; he stammered; for a

*In these times, it is obvious that, with thought transference so prevalent, and communication possible between individuals even over great distances, the emotion described in 1941 as "Mob Hysteria" had a basis in something other than physical action. The thought waves of persons greatly aroused emotionally seem to be more powerful, and when a group of people express, in unison, such an emotion as fear, or rage, it spreads until it takes hold of the reason to the extent of resulting in physical action unguided by reason. Thus, it is possible that Mickey, with his powerful brain waves, was able to produce, singly, enough emanations to influence a whole mob to action—in this case, belief in his guilt.—Ed.

moment words would not come. When they did he answered not the question, but the thought in the man's mind.

"Oh, I didn't, I didn't!" he cried. "I couldn't! You know that, sir—you can catch my thoughts! Can't you?" Anguished, he appealed to the whole crowd. "Can't you? You can see! I have nothing to hide!"

They never took their eyes off Mickey, and never moved. One other man spoke. His manner was that of one making a reaction test.

"There is photographic evidence."

MICKEY took one step backward. His eyes became wild; understanding diminished. Several men answered his step by taking one forward. For one second they stood that way; then Mickey, swept by elemental fear, turned and ran. But he did not get five meters. A pink beam stabbed through the night and caught him full, and then he was lying on the ground, helpless.

Paralyzed, but fully conscious, he saw the crowd surge forward and engulf him. There were exclamations and loud cries. Some one felt his thumb, then flashed a light in his face and examined his eyeballs. Mickey had a flashing realization that they were estimating the effect of the dose of the paralyzing ray.

He lay for some time on the ground among the excited people, and for the first time in his life he telegot. One word, unmistakable, came through to him, again and again.

"Murderer." "Murderer."

Three men came and, with the help of others, carried him to the back seat of a large aircar. On the way Mickey gathered from their talk that he was to be taken to the hospital and put under

(Continued on page 76)

KIDNAPED INTO THE FUTURE!

THINGS really happen fast when Mrs. Number 33 goes out in search of her husband. . . . She goes all the way from the year 4230 back to the Twentieth Century to find him, and when she does! . . .

Without a word the gloriously impressive creature presses two buttons on her wide belt. . . . With a faint hiss, three brilliant streaks of light crackle out and seem to spear the gangsters in their foreheads. . . . Dapper Dan and his chop men lie stretched on the floor. . . .

She marches across the room and jerks her husband to his feet. . . . Poor little No. 33—he was having a marvelous time "night-clubbing" in the Twentieth Century till his super-amazon wife got wise. . . . You'll get a thrill out of his punch-packed adventures in "Kidnaped Into the Future" by William P. McGivern—one of the 10 great stories you'll want to read in the big

FEBRUARY ISSUE

AMAZING STORIES

ON SALE AT ALL NEWS-STANDS DECEMBER 9th!

mechanical hypnosis, to have dredged out of his unconscious the real memories lurking there. He took comfort in this, knowing they would find him innocent.

As the car rose, however, the talk of the three men brought to his mind a new and most dreadful possibility. His thoughts *had* been caught, he learned; they were convin-proof that he *thought* he was innocent; but they did not at all prove that he *was* innocent. In that day almost all crime was crime of insanity—and the insane may perform an act of violence without consciously remembering it! Their moral standards, warped, would not necessarily impose on their consciousness the usual telltale scar. And even a completely normal person had subterranean currents of amazing perversity. He, Mickey might have murdered Talber and not now be conscious of it!

And there was photographic evidence, that man had said! And now that he came to think of it, there was opportunity! He could not account for the few minutes prior to the death-visitation except by an impression he had dozed!

This was the most terrible thing possible! They thought he had done it and he could have done it! The death-visitation may have been nothing but a hallucinatory ghost, swept briefly to his eyes by one of the dark, unknown currents of his unconscious.

After all, all these normals, so infinitely superior to himself in almost everything, must know what they were doing!

In his agony he groaned aloud.

AT THE sound all three men looked at him, startled. Their look prodded Mickey into a new realization. If the muscles of his throat could function again, perhaps his others could too. He tried to lift his hand. It moved. The paralysis was wearing off! They had underestimated his unusual physique, and not given him a sufficient dose!

With an effort Mickey raised his arms. At once the man on each side of him grasped one and held him tight. Mickey strained against their hold, and with growing strength forced his arms free. With two awkward motions, then, he swept the man on his right across against the other, and caught the neck of the pilot in the crook of his arm and pulled him back. He jammed the men roughly together. Weaponless against his superior strength, they were quite helpless.

He glared at them.

"If you so much as move, I'll kill you!" he threatened.

They showed no inclination to disobey.

Mickey slipped into the pilot's seat and, eye on the three frightened men, circled and pointed the car in a direction at right angles to a long pale streak which was growing on the eastern horizon. The men had to be dropped, and before daylight. Their thoughts were highly dangerous.

Well into the mountains he set down the car and pushed them out. They would quickly bring rescue with their thoughts, but with luck he might have a couple of hours. He needed time! He had become a fugitive!

So far he had acted without premeditation, urged by an overpowering instinct to flee. But now, suddenly, he saw he had acted like the imbecile he was. The car was hardly off the ground before he realized there was no place he could flee to! Not with the faintest chance of remaining uncaught. Eternally he was a damned and helpless inferior. Of all the men in the world, he, unable to teleget, he, with most

powerful thought waves and unable to wall them, would have least chance to get safely away and remain unapprehended!

Dawn was at hand. The alarm might already have gone out for him, for the aircar's walls would not have completely blocked those three men's waves. He didn't know what to do. There was nothing, except, perhaps, flight down through the underground city, a short time of skulking, a human rat in that inky tomb of a vanished race, then slow weakening from thirst and starvation, and a lonely, horrible death.

Suddenly he knew he had to see Marta. He flicked on the intercommunicator at his side and put in a message. Then he pointed his car toward that place he had been so glad to escape from just a little while before —the exit of the underground city.

CHAPTER VII

Marta Takes a Hand

MARTA was waiting for him there when he arrived. She slipped inside quickly. With a cry he opened his arms to greet her, but to his surprise she avoided them and held something to his lips.

"Swallow these," she ordered hurriedly.

Wondering, he obeyed. At once he felt his tension slipping away from him. Marta explained:

"I heard the news. Your thoughts would be killing all the birds, so I brought you those bromide tablets—triple dose; we give them to the violently insane. Are you violently insane, Mickey? They'll deaden you considerably." She was smiling slightly as she finished.

They were wonderfully soothing. Even his pressing tragedy seemed a little dulled.

"They think I killed Talber," he told Marta.

"Did you?" she asked, watching him narrowly.

For a second Mickey could only stare at her.

"How can you ask that!" he cried at last, hurt deeply.

Marta smiled again. "I only wanted your reaction," she explained. "Mickey, darling, I don't believe you did it, and I know you don't think you did, but it still is possible. I just say possible. You were under considerable emotional stress last night. Where have you been since I left you?"

Mickey told her everything. His finding of the hand struck her with particular force. He should have supposed she would react more to the unknown voice in the laboratory.

"Mickey, they have a picture," she stated suddenly; "—taken at the moment of Talber's death. It's that which makes them suspect you."

"In heaven's name, explain," Mickey begged.

"They got it at the hospital," Marta said. "When I brought in Talber, the physicians too thought he might have been murdered, so before starting to bring him back they made a special test. As you know, the retina of the eye is a web of nerves which contain protoplasm sensitive to light—that is, they are *affected* by light; there's a chemical change; it's a process of metabolism. For a short time after death millions of minute chemical differentials persist, in exact relation to the last thing the eye beheld. Now, the hospital has an apparatus optically sensitive to these differentials. It can be focussed on the retina of the dead eye, and record them in the black and white of a photographic image." Here Marta stopped and averted her eyes.

"And?" asked Mickey, deeply afraid.

"They used it. The photograph they got showed your face."

"OH I DIDN'T do it, Marta!" Mickey cried, aghast. "I loved Talber like a father! I couldn't have!"

"But you could," Marta said. "I mean you had the opportunity. You told me you thought you dozed. The figure of Talber you saw may have been nothing but a flash of guilty memory." She smiled tenderly. "Mickey, even if you did do it, it wouldn't make a bit of difference in my feelings; but I honestly don't think you did."

"But that photograph!" Mickey reminded her. "How did my face get in it?"

"It must be someone else's."

"Then I have an unknown twin brother," Mickey said ironically. "There can't be anyone else who resembles me. Not me."

"It might be a brother," Marta said levelly. "You didn't grow up a member of any ordinary family group."

"Oh, but that's highly improbable!" Mickey objected seriously. "It's ridiculous!"

"It's fantastic, I admit—but the man who was with Talber when he was killed looks like you. And the man who hypnotized you in that same place had a voice something like yours; you said so. Tell me," she went on, suddenly eager; "that hand—did it feel like your own? I mean, was there any resemblance in it to your own hand? Did you notice?"

"You think maybe this hypothetical brother of mine—twin brother—may have lost it when the laboratory blew up?" Mickey asked.

"It might be a good thing if they could find in the wreckage a—a face like yours."

Mickey shuddered, but tried hard to recollect his impression of that hand. He shook his head.

"I can't remember," he said. "All I know, it was ghastly, there in the dark. I threw it away, twice."

Marta was silent for a moment; then she said flatly:

"Talber was experimenting. He had a secret. That's why he enjoined you to throw that switch in the event of his death. That's why he ran and did it himself, the first thing, when he was revived. He was afraid!"

"Marta," said the young man, looking her steadily in the eyes, "—put it in direct words. Say you think Talber was experimenting on human beings."

"He was experimenting, he had a secret, two men look alike, he was afraid," Marta answered not flinching.

IT was too fantastic. Mickey had to smile. He said:

"It seems I am either a murderer or a mutation. On and on to new heights of lowness."

"Don't, darling," Marta begged. "It might be other things. You and I can't imagine all the possibilities. For instance, Talber may have had your picture placed before him as he died. Fantastic? Of course! But everything here is fantastic. For all I know it may have been a visual hallucination, functioning in reverse of the known process, which set your image on Talber's retina. Lots of things work by reverse that way. It could be still other things. At the moment we can't know. We don't have enough facts."

"Has it occurred to the geniuses," Mickey went on bitterly, "that they might learn something by digging in the wreckage of that laboratory?"

"They'll certainly do that soon, now that it's light."

"Have they then any chance of making the great discovery that they can

hypnotize Talber, and get all the facts direct?"

"Talber won't be revived," Marta said gloomily. "He's dead. Finally."

That was that.

Marta suddenly brightened.

"Mickey!" she cried, "—maybe *you* have facts that can be brought up! There was that time you dozed—and what happened after you were hypnotized by that voice!"

Mickey did not catch any of her enthusiasm.

"One thing or the other, I'd end in the lethal chamber," he said. "I'm just no damn good. I cause nothing but trouble."

He started to tell her about his vague plan to hide in the underground city, but she would not listen.

"Let me sit there!" she ordered. "I'm going to hypnotize you myself; my guardian has the apparatus and he's away!"

Mickey began to fire a little. He let her take his place.

Not long after he lay in a jungle of apparatus while Marta tried to fit on him a headpiece that was much too large. Imperceptibly, volition left him.

CHAPTER VIII

Flight—and Return to Madness

MICKEY awoke in the aircar, far above earth, at a spoken command. There was only the risen sun and the change in environment to tell him that a small slice had been cut from his life. Marta was looking at him.

"Don't be alarmed at where you are," she said. "It was much safer to get you up here before letting your thoughts begin to generate."

"Well?" Mickey asked.

She smiled at the eagerness on his face.

"I don't think you did it," she told him.

"But couldn't you find out for sure?" he asked, surprised.

She shook her head.

"I had trouble with you," she said. "The helmet wouldn't adjust to fit you—and of course I'm no psychiatrist. But I'm sure you didn't! From every angle I probed, your answers came clear. But heavens, Mickey darling, you're fuller of cross-currents than a cat is of fleas!"

Mickey's face showed some disappointment.

"That man with the voice—who was he?" he asked.

"I couldn't find out," Marta said with feeling. "It may be because he left you with strong post-hypnotic suggestions; I don't know; it was very difficult there; but you told me once that your eyes were closed all the time, and I'm pretty sure you never saw him. But some things came easily."

"Tell me!" Mickey begged eagerly.

"It's very curious, and I don't understand it, but all the man seems to have done was question you. He questioned you for some time. Mostly about things of a personal nature, your age, how you grew up, your friends, all about me, your place in society, your relations with Talber; but also details about the social organization and current technology. Questions such as an ignorant man from another planet might ask. Does this make sense to you?"

"No," admitted Mickey.

"Nor to me. It's absurd to imagine that some lone, ignorant interplanetary or interdimensional traveler, coincidentally looking and talking like you, landed underground in Talber's laboratory, murdered him, then was all afire to find out how long you've known me, if thought waves can be recorded, how quickly insanity can be cured, and a

mess of other stuff like that!"

"Is that what you got out of my head?" Mickey asked.

"Yes."

"Then I must be crazy after all."

"I got something else," Marta went on, "—something you should have told me but didn't. It's about that hand. The second time you picked it up you noticed that between the fingers, where they join the hand, there were slight webs—like those on the feet of a duck, but very rudimentary."

"OH—that," Mickey said, suddenly remembering. "I guess I did think I noticed something of the kind, but it was only a flash, and afterwards I was sure I was mistaken. I forgot all about it."

"That may be," Marta said, "but you know of the mind's 'forgetting mechanism,' which causes people to 'forget' things with unpleasant or painful associations. I think—remember, I'm no expert—but I think, in this case, that that mechanism may have operated. Can you think of any reason why it might have?"

"No," Mickey said.

"I think it may still be operating," Marta observed with a smile. "Suppose —just suppose—Talber was experimenting with human mutations. That would be a painful thing for you to discover, wouldn't it?"

"You mean, that thought might have occurred to me on feeling the webs—but was at once repressed, deep in my unconscious, as incompatible with my regard for Talber?"

"Exactly."

"It's possible, I guess," Mickey said. "But naturally I can't tell you I believe it."

"Of course you can't," Marta agreed. "Oh, I may be wrong! If it had been anything but a bloody hand I might have been able to detect whether there was any incongruousness between the cause and its emotional effect. But as it was, the problem would have stumped a psychiatrist, I'm sure.

"Darling, if I could only have fitted that headpiece! I never realized you had such a small head!"

"If I had a larger one I'd never have fallen for you," Mickey told her.

Marta laughed.

"Don't start thinking about me," she warned. "You'll begin to supergenerate!"

Mickey sat silent for a moment, lost in thought.

"Maybe you're right about that hand," he said at length. "And Talber."

"And about your being innocent!" Marta added. "Of course I'm right. I always am."

"Something tells me I'm a mutation," Mickey said, again in deep gloom.

"O. K.," Marta replied cheerfully. "I'd love you if your parents were monkeys and you were born in a test tube!"

Mickey grabbed and hugged her. Always the woman, she found that a good moment for something she had in mind

"DARLING, give yourself up," she suddenly pleaded in a low voice. "At my hospital. I'll go with you. You couldn't hide out a day before they'd have you. There'll be no lethal chamber—that's silly. They'll hypnotize you, tap your unconscious expertly, and find that you're innocent. I'm positive you are! And they may find other facts, important ones. It's so mixed up; all we can do is guess. Even if you *should* turn out to be a mutation, they wouldn't do anything to you for that. But I don't believe you're one—not unless I'm one too. No—we're both of the old line. And some day we're going to get married, and have children of the old line to prove it. Only—you *have* to give

yourself up."

She stopped. Mickey was holding out his hands, palms up.

"I notice you cleaned me up a bit," he said.

"You were filthy," she explained.

Keeping his eyes on her he then pointed down through the floor glass of the car.

"I also notice we've been right over the hospital for the last five minutes," he said. "Quite a coincidence."

"It's *not* a coincidence," Marta admitted boldly.

Mickey said, "I'd rather be a dead mutation than a managed husband."

"You imbecile!" exclaimed Marta. "I've been managing you for ten months! Here we go!"

She laid hand on the elevator, and the car eased into its long drop.

THEY left the car on the parking area and hand in hand walked up the wide path to the entrance. The robot in the lobby automatically noted their arrival as they passed by it and turned toward the large reception room.

"No robots from now," Marta said. "You'll be handled by humans only, and treated with the utmost sympathy. Almost all our cases are mental, in early stages. They don't get very bad any more without detection."

The reception room was empty. Somewhat surprised, Marta conducted her fugitive-patient through a corridor which led to the resident doctors' lounge. When she opened the door an extremely odd tableau lay revealed.

A dozen buff-smocked physicians and psychiatrists of both sexes stood at random in various parts of the room, each one facing in a different direction and looking slightly upward in a pose of rapt, motionless attention. They seemed to be telegetting, and receiving with pure reverence the message being transmitted. The message was of considerable intensity, for in Marta herself there had existed, for the past few minutes, a faint "feeling."

She stood and looked with the greatest surprise. The attitudes of the doctors did not change.

"Is this perhaps the violent ward?" Mickey whispered.

She shushed him.

As she did so a shocking thing happened. One of the physicians, a young man, went out of his head. They saw his quiet pose break, his face contort; and then his mouth opened in a long, irregular burst of crazy laughter. Most surprising of all, not one of his confreres paid any attention to this! They remained as they were, and the unfortunate young man, breaking off his laugh, stumbled through a circle with a wild and tortured look on his face and then fell at length on the floor, where he jerked with convulsions.

Marta stared, then she ran forward and tugged at the arm of the nearest of the standing doctors, a woman; but to her amazement even that did not succeed in getting any attention. She tried again with another, a man, but he merely disengaged her hand and continued his rapt telegetting.

For a moment Marta stood motionless again, appalled.

"This is hypnotism!" she cried then to Mickey. "Mass hypnotism! Come with me!"

SHE ran back out into the corridor and up a flight of steps into a ward. The nurses there were showing the same amazing behavior, except that two of them, males, were rolling back and forth on the floor, blood-flecked foam at their lips, while a woman marched senselessly up and down the room. One of the patients sat at the head of his bed smiling benignly over the mad

scene, all his bedclothes wrapped around him. Another was under his bed, only his feet sticking out.

"This is terrible!" Marta exclaimed. "Every one's hypnotized! It's a mass phenomenon! It's being done over the air, by thought wave!"

"But why are those men rolling around?" Mickey asked. "That's a funny kind of hypnotism."

"I don't know," Marta answered. "Something is being transmitted, very powerfully; I can feel it, but can't make out what it is. How can I find out?" She stood a moment thinking. Then, "Wait!" she cried. "I know what. There's a case of echolalia. Follow me."

She hurried out of the ward and up another flight of steps to the floor above. As she went she explained over her shoulder:

"It's a marked case. A kind of insanity. We haven't got to work on him yet. In echolalia the patient shows a strong tendency to repeat, like an echo, things spoken or transmitted to him. Here."

She stopped before the door of a private room. Nearby in the corridor stood an attendant, smiling foolishly. He let her take his keys from his belt without protest, and with one of them she opened the door. Mickey followed her in.

The room was occupied by a very old man, feeble and emaciated, but with a distinguished face and carriage. As they entered he turned at an angle to them, an absent frown on his face.

"I am coming," he said—but this seemed to have no meaning. Marta went close to him.

"What is it you hear, Myntel?" she asked.

"What is it you hear, Myntel?" repeated the old man, like a parrot. Marta tried again.

"Listen," she said, and was about to go on when the man repeated:

"Listen."

"There's a thought message," Marta went on hurriedly. "What does it say?"

"There's a thought message," the old man repeated. "What does it say?"

Marta made a gesture of annoyance. They waited.

"Nice place you have here," Mickey observed suddenly.

"Nice place," said the old man.

Marta managed Mickey with a look. The two waited some more.

THE old man showed no sign of telegetting anything unusual. He fussed about the bed, then feebly tried to pull off the mattress. His movements were quite without purpose. But in the middle of them, without stopping, he spoke again.

"The Blue God comes," he said, in the same parrotlike tone as before. "The Blue God, strong and beautiful, comes to Earth."

Here he ceased speaking, but he continued tugging at the mattress. Mickey and Marta exchanged looks of amazement. The patient resumed suddenly, still showing no sign that he was telegetting.

"I am not white in color, but a surpassingly lovely blue. I am wise beyond all imagining." Again the old man stopped speaking. Then he went on: "You will love me; you'll adore me." Pause. "I have come to lead you, come to lead you, come to lead you, come to lead you—" The mattress fell off.

Marta tossed her head in annoyance. These cases — indeed, many insane cases, sometimes repeated a phrase endlessly. The old man lay down on the floor and tried futilely to wrap the thick mattress about him; but this seemed to tire him, for he soon stopped and lay very still. Marta stepped over and

prodded him with her foot.

"Speak!" she ordered.

"Speak!" he repeated.

They waited. Again he parroted the thoughts reaching him.

"You will know me by my lovely blue color." Pause. "Blue are my eyes, my skin, my hair." Pause. I am nearly two meters tall, broad in the shoulders, and strong as were the men of past ages." Pause. "Among you lives the man Mickey, whom you call an imbecile." Pause—while Mickey jerked with amazement. "For reasons which I soon will make known, I have sent him on before me." Pause. "He it is who in body and features I resemble." Pause. "Though not in color, for I am of a surpassingly beautiful blue." Pause. "And wise, and wise, and wise, and wise," — pause — "beyond-the-imagining-of-men." The old man finished this in a rush.

CHAPTER IX

Mickey Becomes a God

MARTA fairly pulled the astounded Mickey out into the corridor.

"You see?" she asked excitedly.

He could see nothing at all.

"It's that other—the one who murdered Talber—the one of the photograph, who resembles you!"

"Yes, but—" began Mickey haltingly.

"He's a mutation!" Marta cried. "I know what's happening! I know! This is my business! He's making himself acceptable!"

"You mean—"

"Oh Mickey, I know! This is my business! The man's a mutant. At any rate his color is blue, all blue. And he must have remarkable powers. He is now in process of making himself acceptable. With his blue color people would loathe him, and as a marked mutant he would be hunted down and confined or even destroyed. More than that, he seems to be aiming to steal control of the country. He's putting over a tremendous mass hypnotism. He's caught everyone completely off guard, just as he did you! A well hypnotized person believes anything the hypnotist tells him, however illogical and ridiculous!"

"But — but —" began the flabbergasted Mickey, "to me he just seems to be making them crazy. Half of them are completely out of control!"

"Ah no—that's the proof of what I say!" Marta went on. "By that message he is setting up powerful conflicts. There can hardly be a person alive to whom the thought of a blue man would not be disgusting, and there certainly is none who when normal would stomach for one second the idea that any god, especially a blue one, was coming to 'lead' him. He's violating most powerful instincts. But he's got to do it, to make himself acceptable! With the people we've seen he seems to be succeeding, thanks to the power of his transmission and his trick of catching them all off guard. The differences in reaction are the result of different personal equations. Some, unable to reconcile their normal attitudes with his revolting suggestions, break down under their internal conflict and escape into insanity!"

Marta spoke with overpowering conviction. It sounded rational to Mickey. And after all, as she had said, this was her business.

"The question is, over how great an area is he exerting this hypnosis?" Marta went on. "From its success here it might be thought he is somewhere in the neighborhood, close by; but I rather doubt this. Why should he concentrate on this rural area? He must at least be covering the City. Don't you think?"

"My God!" Mickey said. "And he looks like me!"

"He's *related* to you, and I was wrong," Marta corrected inexorably. "Come, you mutant," she went on, "let's get into the City and see what's happening there!"

STILL catching up with Marta's rush of amazing ideas, Mickey followed her out of the hospital and into the air-car. In a moment they were high in the air, headed for the City, ten kilometers away.

Marta was thrilled over the logical structure she so quickly had built with her explanations. As they went she added confirming bricks.

"The only lucky ones are stupids like you and me, for we aren't getting his messages. The whole business is relative. Speaking generally, one is hypnotizable in direct proportion to one's intelligence. I'm getting only a dull, indescribable feeling. The upper classes are getting the actual messages, and the brainiest of all are the ones who are going under first, and most completely. At first crack this mutant relative of yours has taken all our leaders right out of the play! Except maybe for a few in thought-proof laboratories, who will go under as soon as they emerge. The city will be chaos, mark my words. There'll be a tremendous job, re-conditioning all the insane after he has finished with them."

"I don't get anything at all," said Mickey, a little glumly.

Marta was tactful. Patting his hand and including herself, she said:

"We're both very lucky. And maybe, since we have special knowledge about this Blue God, and are among the very few people left normal, we may be able to do something. It would be wonderfully ironical if a couple of stupids like us were instrumental in saving the civilization of all the helpless geniuses. They might let us marry, Mickey! And if that's no inducement, you should want to meet this relative of yours for personal reasons!"

Up to now Mickey, snowed under with surprises, had been merely tagging along after Marta's ideas, but at her last words he caught up.

"Yes," he agreed firmly, "I *would* like to meet him. And perhaps we *can* do something. If only," he added with a wry smile, "to save what we can of the family honor."

"You have remarkable relatives," Marta said, smiling at him gaily. "Remarkable powers. Thoughts and emotions strong, like yours."

"All this is only supposition and wishful thinking," Mickey retorted. "We'll see what we see."

The outskirts of the city passed beneath them. From their height they could gain no inkling of how the inhabitants were behaving. Early as it was, thousands would be up and about.

Marta pressed forward steadily, then lowered and set down at the edge of the midtown landing area.

WITHOUT getting out of the car they saw that she had been right in supposing that the City would be affected. Of the several score people close by, two out of three stood or walked as is listening to divinity. Each of the others had his own variety of insane behavior, much of it grotesque. Some ran and gesticulated, some stood on the heavy plastic benches and addressed the four winds, two, quite near, were in a tree. One shed his clothes, and a woman ran after him and pulled his garments over her own. Many lay down and kicked and rolled. Men and women, every one, took part in the general frenzy. It was a world gone mad.

Although Marta had predicted it, she

was almost overcome at the sight. She opened the door of the car, and then they got the babble of accompanying sounds.

"Their inner conflicts must be terrible!" Marta exclaimed compassionately. "So many of them have been unable to reconcile the hypnotic commands with their elemental instincts!"

They sat there and watched, fascinated.

"There is a spatial factor," Mickey said at length, thoughtfully. "The effect—or at least the intensity of the waves—should be proportional to the distance from the point of origin; but the effect on the people here seems no different from that shown by those at the hospital. We may be fairly sure there is only one point of origin—the mutant's head—because it is highly improbable that there is more than one, and because there is no known way to record the microscopic thought wave for intelligible re-transmission. You remember that was one of the questions asked me, when I was hypnotized in the laboratory.

"Now that is very interesting. Marta, if you were the mutant and had this power, where would you place yourself to exert it? Do you think it likely he would try to overcome the country, city by city? Surely not. For at least two reasons: it would take a long time, and it would bring quick and certain counter-measures from the untouched cities. But, if we assume he is telecasting from one point —say right here—with amplification enough to affect the people of the West Coast, he would just about kill the people nearby—wouldn't he?"

"No," corrected Marta, interrupting; "beyond a certain intensity people's brains would just get numb, and beyond that they'd fall unconscious."

"No matter," Mickey said. "You see what I'm driving at. There's an intensity differential, and he has to take account of it. The logic of the situation prevents both place-after-place and one-point general transmission from the ground; so—"

"He would have to transmit from high in the air," picked up Marta. "Oh, it would have to be very high, if he wanted to cover the whole continent at once. He would need a space ship."

"That's it exactly," Mickey replied. "I wonder if we can get anyone to ascertain the direction of the transmission for us. I know it's beyond me."

"The radio-technies can—or could, if they were normal," Marta replied.

"And they're over in the Communications Building," Mickey added quickly. "Come on, gal, and we'll see what we can do."

THEY stepped out, crossed the park, and for several blocks picked their way amid an indescribable confusion of addled citizens. But to their dismay the building was not yet open for the day, and the mighty robot on watch at the entrance would not let them by.

This was serious. Neither could think of any other good point of attack.

They had come to realize fully their responsibility. Only imbeciles and morons were immune to the hypnotizing messages; and of the insignificant handful of such lowly citizens in the country, no one else possessed their special knowledge. All hope of salvaging the situation rested squarely on them, and particularly on what they might be able to accomplish in that building. But —they could not get by the robot at the door!

It was extremely unlikely that, alone, they could overcome it. And —dismaying thought—even if they did, how were they to get a crew of addled technies to give their help? Marta had not been

able even to get the attention of those two doctors back in the hospital.

They looked at each other, worried, wondering—and then Mickey suddenly chuckled. The chuckle continued, and grew into a repressed laugh that itself continued. He seemed simply bursting with amusement. Marta looked at him sharply, suddenly fearful that he too had been affected. He bent and whispered in her ear—and then she too laughed.

Mickey had decided to become a god. A blue god.

In a nearby store Marta bought the dye, and in a small room off the public lounge, she applied it. To his arms, to his legs, to his face and neck, and to his hair.

CHAPTER X

A Blue God Declares War

"HOW do I look?" Mickey asked. "Dreadful! Nine days drowned!"

"Then I should look very much like a blue god."

"The shade's a bit dark for your surpassing type of beauty. I think a little toward the yellow or perhaps the green, would be more becoming," Marta said critically, head on one side. She saw a few spots she had missed. "I wonder what the color for imbecile gods is, this year," she added, touching them up.

"At any rate, while I last they're going to accept me for the Blue God," Mickey said with determination. "I'll make them! I'll hypnotize 'em myself! You said my thoughts would be a-killing the birds—but shucks, you've never seen me bust loose. I'll blow their fuses!"

"Such power!" Marta said. "Seems to run in the family."

"I shan't have to let loose, though. Just my ordinary working intensity. My public's been well prepared. I might say they're crazy to see me."

"Yes, crazy," murmured Marta, still busy with handkerchief and bottle.

"You know, it's very decent of the Blue God to tell everyone I look like him. Helps one up the ladder. There's nothing like a little influence in the high places."

Marta stood back a little, finished.

"You look dreadful!" she exclaimed again.

Mickey laughed, then turned more serious.

"Come on," he said, "and cross your fingers if you see another Blue God."

Partly shielding himself behind Marta, he slipped across the corner of the lounge and into a service hallway. They took the stairs to the ground level. The door, there, opened into a side street. Peeping, they saw that four men were out on the pavement. One was sitting and muttering, one was lying on the curb about to roll off, and the other two were on their feet, smiling idiotically.

"Not quite the most impressive setting for the appearance of a Blue God," Mickey said, "but it will have to do, I guess. Here we plunge, Marta. Be respectful, now, and keep a little behind." With the last words he stepped boldly out on the pavement and Marta followed as directed.

AT once, together, the two men on their feet turned and looked at Mickey. He saw their eyes nearly pop out of their heads, but, never hesitating, he passed by them and started toward the corner of the building, where lay the main street.

Like magic the many people in the intersection turned toward him and stared. Several cried out. Mickey hoped this quick attention was a good

thing, on the theory he should be seen by as many people as possible on his initial appearance. At any rate, he was in for it now! With the dignity of a god—though a little weak in the knees—he strode slowly toward them.

His psyche had waited for that moment. Now that he was committed to the adventure, it began popping a whole flock of alarming questions in his head What messages was the Blue God transmitting at that moment? Would they conflict with what he, Mickey, was doing and cause the people to reject him? Would the Blue God, wherever he was, teleget the fraud and proceed to take steps? And most frightening of all, would Mickey's own irrepressible un-Blue Godlike thoughts betray him to the people as the impostor he was? He might be mobbed! But with the dignity of a god—though now a bit wobbly in the knees—he strode ahead.

People piled into the corner from all directions and stood staring, motioning, exclaiming. Then several began to move toward him, and at once all the others began to follow. Several then began to run, and in a few seconds all were running. A yelling mob swept down on him!

Out of the medulla of the adrenals of the god Mickey flowed minute droplets of a liquid, and a pair of quite wobbly knees stiffened. He *would* not harbor any thought incongrouous with his imposture. He would not only act like a god but he'd think like one. I am the Blue God, he told himself. I *am* the Blue God. I have come to lead these mortals.

The van of the flood swept to within five meters of him, then parted to the sides and tried to stop. The waves behind crowded on their heels, piled up, and pushed them on, and in an instant the dyed god was enfolded in a bedlam. Women shrieked, men shouted, all shoved toward the divine center. The vacant ring around Mickey narrowed and disappeared in the efforts of everyone to get close to his person and stay there. Some tried to kneel before him, others to touch him, still others to kiss his clothes. Some, relatively stable till then, went stark mad. Dozens fell down and were trampled. This was being mobbed in a way he had not expected, but equally dangerous!

"Peace!" yelled Mickey suddenly, holding up one arm. "Stand back from the Blue God!"

With one movement the mob rolled back from him.

"Silence in the presence of the Blue God!" he thundered.

AS if a speaker had been switched off, the crowd fell silent.

God Mickey improved the opportunity.

"I am the Blue God!" he orated, a little out of breath. "I have come to lead you. I am blue, a most surpassing blue. I am wise, wise beyond dreams of wisdom. You will not touch your god, mortals. Make way!"

Impressively he turned and sneaked a look at Marta. She was still there behind him, chin high but trembling. Just as impressively he faced back, then started ahead again, striding as godlike as he could over a half dozen men who lay jerking and kicking in his way. More and more people appeared. He reached the corner.

The mob grew; the new arrivals pushed, cried out, climbed each other to see him. Mickey stopped and again gave his spiel.

"Peace!" he thundered. "Shove not! Yell not! Touch me not! I am your Blue God. You will not be afraid, for I have come to help you. I love you! You love me! Don't fail to respect the great white goddess, my consort, who

follows me!"

Mickey would not have believed it possible, but he began really to feel like a god. In these few minutes layers of inferiority were falling away from him.

He drew near the entrance to the Communications Building. An uncrazy robot still guarded the entrance. Mickey turned to the adoring mob and again raised his arm.

"The Blue God chooses to enter here," he told them. "If there is one among you with the authority, he will speak to the guardian robot so that I may pass."

A half dozen men leaped out of the crowd and ran to the mechanism. That creation, unadjusted for any situation involving the arrival of a god, calmly told them to stand back and wait for the proper opening of the building. This stopped the men. Apparently they were mere willing Willies, lacking the authority needed. Boldly, then, Mickey ordered:

"Rush the robot! Derange it!"

In one wave the mob poured on the unfortunate mechanism. Its great metal arms struck out vigorously; heads cracked, and broken human bodies went sailing through the air. But the mob never faltered, and in only a few seconds the controls of the robot were reached and it settled back on it heels, motionless and helpless.

THOUGH sickened at the blood and mangled bodies, Mickey managed to step with some appearance of dignity through the mess, and then turned. Marta, he saw with relief, was still there, chin up but quivering. The mob was again restless and unquiet. Mickey decided he had better prepare it against excesses while he was out of sight. He held up his arm.

"Silence!" he thundered.

There was silence. It came so quickly that it was almost frightening, even to a Blue God.

"I shall go into this building and remain awhile," Mickey told them. "I desire to be undisturbed by any clamor. You will disperse, and go quietly to your homes or to your work. Tell all whom you meet, and all to whom you transmit, that the great Blue God has arrived. Warn everyone not to assemble here. Be quiet and orderly. Attend to the crushed and wounded. Now go!"

Obediently the crowd began to disperse. Mickey and his consort turned and entered the building alone.

Marta ran the elevator, and as they ascended Mickey dared to wink at her —but no more. At the top floor the door opened on a large and adoring group of radio-technies and other workers, waiting to receive them. Mickey stretched himself another centimeter and stepped out of the elevator in the way he felt a god should.

"Rise," he said to the technie nearest to him, who was on his knees. The man obeyed, a look of worship on his face. "I am your Blue God," said Mickey, and went on with the rigmarole he had given below, and which now came quite naturally to his lips. No use taking chances. Finished, he ordered:

"Conduct me to your transmission rooms."

One of the group, the chief, apparently, bowed and pointed, then went humbly before, opening the proper doors and indicating the way. The others followed, a wild-eyed and adoring train.

Arrived, Mickey found himself in an extremely large room containing transmission equipment of all kinds. He was ready with his procedure.

"Attend me," he commanded the chief. "Do you maintain constant contact with all parts of the world?" he asked.

THE chief kept his eyes humbly on Mickey's blue knees, and no answer passed his lips.

"You will verbalize when answering," Mickey ordered serenely. "Now repeat."

"We maintain such contact, Master," came the respectful answer.

"Over what area has my announcement of my arrival extended?" Mickey asked.

"Only the North American Continent and adjacent portions, in a wide circle, have been so honored, Master," was the reply.

"To what extent have the inhabitants so reached been receptive to my announcement?"

"They are all wholly your adoring subjects, Master."

Mickey stretched again for that centimeter. With magnificent aplomb he said:

"You are to know that I possess the power to transmit my thoughts from several directions at once. For instance, I am now standing before you, in my person, as you can see, but I am also broadcasting personal messages from a point or points outside this room. I choose to test your competence. From how many points in this continental circle am I telecasting at this moment?"

Never taking his eyes from Mickey's blue and now steady knees the man said:

"Please be so gracious as to excuse a few seconds' wait."

He remained motionless and silent, but a moment later the awe-stricken group of technies behind him flew apart and began working apparati in several parts of the room. A few seconds later the chief said to Mickey's knees:

"Your thoughts come from but from one place outside this room, Master."

"You will determine the direction and the distance of that point of origin," Mickey ordered.

"Thank you, Master."

The men flew to other apparati, and made careful adjustments and calculations. The chief reported:

"The point of origin is in nearby space, Master—13,364.3 kilometers vertically over Toomey, in Region R-2."

"You appear competent," Mickey allowed with easy condescension. "Check that point every three minutes, and inform me at once if it moves, relative to Toomey. Also, at once, make contact with the official who has charge of the continent's space ships. Order him to make an instant check to determine if any ships are missing, or engaged in any illegal or unconventional activity, and if so how many, and of what type. Now, conduct me to a room with thought-proof walls. I want to be alone. You will bring your information to me there."

The man bowed deeply.

"As you command, Master," he said. "If you will be pleased to step this way." He indicated a door opening off the room.

SERENELY, Mickey, followed by his consort, walked to it, turned and for a moment surveyed the room and its occupants, then entered and closed the door.

"My God!" exclaimed Marta, exploding with laughter. Like firecracker on firecracker she set Mickey, too, off, and they laughed till they both lay bent double on the floor, weak with belly pain.

"My darling blue god—Mickey!" Marta said tenderly and adoringly until she got to his name, when she exploded and once more set him off.

Mickey felt he would die with cramps, and it took a great effort to get

to his feet.

"Marta, this is serious!" he warned her when he had caught his breath. "Every human being on this continent is hypnotized! An egocentric mutant is taking over! A good part of the inhabitants are stark mad already, and in a few hours all the rest may go that way. Pull yourself together—and don't tempt me, either!"

"Yes, my god," said Marta, still on the floor; but as she started off again there came a knock on the door and she stopped at once and got to her feet. When she had brushed the tears from her eyes Mickey opened the door. The chief stood there, eyes again on Mickey's knees.

"All space ships are accounted for, Master, except one cargo carrier based at the Whitney yards, which disappeared unaccountably just before dawn this morning. None of the crew is missing. I beg you to pardon the delay, but the news of your arrival has caused a considerable disruption of our services."

"I am not displeased," Mickey said. He asked:

"Has there been any change in the point of origin of my messages from space?"

"No, Master."

"One thing more, then. I desire the use of the nearest space warship, fully armed and ready for action, and with a full complement of functionable officers and men. You will note that I said 'functionable.' Contact the nearest one, and arrange that it be placed at my disposal."

"Yes, Master."

The man left. Marta was not laughing now.

"Mickey—what are you going to do?" she asked.

"The obvious," was the reply. "What else? Blue God Number One is out there in space, deluging Earth with his hypnotizing suggestions. He must be stopped or destroyed. I, apparently, am the only man who is normal and has knowledge of the situation, so I must act. You will remain here."

"No, no," Marta protested; "if you go, I go with you. Heavens knows what danger you may be exposing yourself to."

"You'll stay here," Mickey told her firmly. "God's can't be managed. At least they shouldn't be."

"Then they shouldn't have consorts," was her answer.

Mickey had to smile. That seemed to settle it.

The two waited, soberly discussing Mickey's plans. In a few minutes the chief knocked again, with the information that the warship was waiting. He had taken the liberty to order an aircar to wait for Mickey and his consort on the roof.

He backed away from the door. Mickey stepped to one side and gave Marta a last hug.

"How gruesome you are, darling!" Marta said. "Did I tell you that color's fast?"

CHAPTER XI

The Blue God

THE officers and men of the space warship M-17 stood at awe-stricken attention, but as Mickey and Marta stepped out of the aircar they broke ranks and surrounded the two adoringly.

"Back to your places!" thundered Mickey. To one who stood apart, and who was obviously the captain, he said imperiously:

"Captain, you will escort me to the control room."

Humbly, that man showed the way. Mickey, seeing it empty, lost no time.

"You know who I am?" he asked

"Yes, Master. You are the Blue God."

"Are you at this moment receiving thought messages announcing my coming?"

"Yes, Master."

"How would you explain that, when I stand here before you?"

"I cannot explain it," was the answer. The Blue God has unthinkable power."

Mickey gave him the unthinkable explanation that he had given the chief of the technies—that he, the Blue God, was able to be in one place, yet at the same time send out messages originating from another. He knew all along that it was not necessary to be logical with a hypnotized person, but he couldn't help saying something; it made him feel better. He next asked:

"Captain, to what extent are my waves blocked by the hull of this ship?"

"The intensity of all thought waves is diminished by twenty-one per cent, Master," was the answer. "With all screens on this rises to twenty-seven."

"Have you means to increase the blockage?"

"No master. This ship, built for war, was by intention designed for their maximum receipt, because the chance overcatching of the enemy's intentions might be of inestimable advantage. My cubby, however, is proofed, and from within it, in battle, I can transmit my orders by wire in code. At that time the crew at their stations, perform merely mechanical acts, according to coded numbers they receive."

Mickey listened carefully to this.

"The intensity of my wave, at any point, will vary inversely as the square of the distance from its point of origin, will it not?" he began but here Mickey made his first mistake as a psychologist. Under the conditions of the hypnotic state the man would believe everything told him, and so could only answer "yes" to a question phrased like a statement. Marta caught his eye and he realized this at once. He said quickly:

"You will disregard that statement."

"Yes, Master."

WITH these words Mickey saw he had made another mistake—and Marta had noticed this one too. His order was quite unnecessary! He came as near blushing as a blue god can; but then he tightened up and attacked from another angle.

"What is the maximum distance at which you can focus on a space ship and with certainty destroy it?" he asked.

"That depends on the circumstances, Master. Our beam is only a needle. In battle, at high speeds and accelerations, the distance would be of the order of a thousand kilometers for high probability of hitting. At lower speeds and acceleration it might be ten times that."

"So," said the God Mickey. "Very well, Captain, my outside waves are originating from a space point 13,364.3 kilometers vertically above the town of Toomey, in Region R-2. By a coincidence that point of origin is now occupied by a space ship. The ship is motionless, relative to Toomey. It is my will that the ship be destroyed. You will proceed toward it indirectly, at your maximum safe speed, in an arc of a circle of about 13,000 kilometers' diameter, and so dispose your ship as to annihilate it with maximum certainty and minimum risk. I shall leave it to you to decide the distance at which to touch off. Am I understood?"

"Perfectly, Master."

"As soon as it is safe, turn on your screens. I want the minimum effect of that outside wave. Now give the necessary orders. Do not lose a second."

"Yes, Master."

The captain, like the chief of the technies, before, remained motionless. Men appeared in the control room and set to work. In a moment he said:

"It is begun, Master."

Mickey felt the ship lift gently, then rise faster and faster as it took what acceleration was safe. The sensation became sickening. He knew a good deal about space ships in a general way, but neither he nor Marta had ever been in one before.

Powerful generators, below, sounded; began to whine. Higher and higher rose the pitch, till the whine became a scream. When Mickey felt his eardrums would split the scream lessened in intensity, though the pitch continued to rise. Then the intensity diminished until it was gone, and there followed an interval of indescribable opppression. That, he knew, would be caused by a supersonic waves. In a moment the oppression ceased, to be followed, suddenly, by a soft, many-tongue hiss. The power built up, the screens were on. Maximum wave blocking had been reached.

The captain still stood there. Mickey asked:

"Where is your cubby?"

"Here Master." The officer respectfully pointed to a door just behind him.

"I shall occupy it myself," Mickey informed him. "Now, I want you to summon your most sensitive telegetter. Let others take over his duties."

ALMOST at once the man was there, kneeling.

"Rise," Mickey commanded. "Be verbal with me. I am very beautiful," Mickey said somewhat hurriedly.

"You are very beautiful, Highness," was the humble reply. This man kept his eyes on his Blue God's feet.

"What is your name?"

"Sarton, Highness."

"You may stop Highnessing me. Can you catch my thoughts, reaching you from somewhere outside this ship?"

"Yes."

"What am I saying?"

"You are saying that you come to lead the children of Earth."

"Repeat verbatim what you hear."

" 'I am a most beautiful blue,' " the man intoned.

" 'Tall am I, with broad shoulders and mighty muscles, much like the man Mickey whom you call an imbecile. By this, and by my color, shall you know me. I come—' "

"Enough," Mickey interrupted. "You will remain at this door, Sarton, and continue to teleget my messages. You will be silent. If the intensity of my messages should weaken appreciably, you will knock on the door and so inform me. If the substance of my messages should change, however, then you will knock at once on the door and again start speaking aloud, repeating them to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Captain, inform me when you come within range."

"Yes, Master."

Mickey entered the cubby, and when Marta had followed closed the door.

"We're on very thin ice," Mickey told her at once, soberly. "There'll come a moment when we'll set off the ship's warn. As a cargo carrier it won't have a ray projector, but heaven knows what other resources Blue God Number One has. He doesn't need anything else—not with his suggestive power. With it he could drive the crew crazy. He could make them tear us to pieces! But I can't think of any way to prevent it. There is no way. I could pack a few of the crew in here, and they'd be immune to his thoughts—but two-thirds would be left outside, and they'd control the ship."

"Why did you tell the captain to approach in the arc of that big circle?" Marta asked.

"Ah, that's most important!" Mickey told her. "There's a high probability that the Blue God is beaming. If he weren't, his own messages, amplified, would crack back into his head and knock him silly. The intensity at the source is terriffic. By the law governing the variation of intensity with distance, it would be roughly 180 times what it is on Earth! I figured it in my little head. That increase is what we would be running into if we went to the ship directly. By approaching it in an arc we may avoid the increase—and, just as important, we may avoid getting some unpleasant special instructions. That's why I posted that man outside the door. He'll warn us automatically if the Blue God changes his message."

Marta gazed at Mickey with admiration.

"You may be only a one-circuit imbecile," she said, "but darling, that circuit does resonate!"

MICKEY would not smile.

"I resonate all right," he said. "Twice out there I pulled boners with the captain. They were trifling things, and he was quite opaque to them, but the principle was important. I had intended to take a hand in stalking that space ship, but after those slips I couldn't trust myself! You understand? I'd forget, and state an opinion or reflection, and the man in his state would say 'Yes, Master' and act on it—and it might be the worst action possible! No, no! He can be trusted, if I can't. I'll stay in here. Anyway, here, the Blue God won't be getting my thoughts —and that's extremely important."

"Then our one chance lies in bringing the ship within range before the Blue God acts," Marta said thoughtfully. "Yes," Mickey said. "If we do, we win. If not—" He shrugged his shoulders and did not complete the thought. "The imbecile Mickey has done all he can. From now on it's strictly a matter of luck."

They set themselves to wait. Many minutes passed; then deceleration began, and again brought them a sickening feeling. Twice Sarton knocked with cheering reports of a steadily decreasing intensity. The beam, apparently, was not sharp. More minutes passed, and the two talked a little more hopefully. But their tension was such that both started at the next knock on the door. It was the captain.

"We're coming within range, Master," he said.

"How close are we?" Mickey asked.

"Nearly 4,000 kilometers, Master."

"Touch off at the earliest second you feel sure you can hit and destroy," Mickey ordered.

"Yes, Master."

As he was leaving Mickey caught a glimpse of the viewing screens. In one, the other ship was only a bright speck, but in another, giving high magnification, it showed as a gleaming sphere, outwardly like their own. He went to the door, held it open just a centimeter, and watched.

The captain returned to an accessory panel of controls and stood motionless before it, eyes on several meters. One, Mickey could see, was slowly creeping to a vertical position. As it came close the captain stirred slightly; it was as if he were waiting for it to reach that point, and then he would act. It came still closer. This was the moment! It was there!

At that precise instant Sarton, outside the cubby, knocked and said:

"You will not touch off. Not touch off. You will not touch off."

"Yes—you will!" cried Mickey,

opening the door wider. "Do it! Touch off! At once! I, the Blue God, command you! Ignore all outer commands!"

But he could not get the captain's attention. The man stood looking upward, as if transfixed; then he turned slowly, tortured lines of an intense inner conflict on his face.

"Touch off!" cried Mickey frantically. "I command you!"

THE silver sphere still filled the screen; Sarton, from his expression, was getting fresh messages, but now he did not speak! Had he been forbidden? In an agony of apprehension Mickey rushed out and shook the captain roughly.

"Touch off!" he yelled in the man's face. "I command you! I, the Blue God, command you to touch off!"

The captain fell to the floor.

As Mickey stood there, panting and at bay, he for the second and last time in his life telegot. A smooth and soothing voice, sad, frightening, familiar, cut clearly through to him.

"Mickey," it said, "you are helpless. Marta, you are helpless. You will stand quietly and obey my will. You have no desire to resist me. You are relaxed and amenable."

The voice ceased. Mickey stood helpless and amenable. Marta stood at his side, in the same condition. The captain got slowly to his feet, and so did one of the other officers who had fallen. Every uniformed figure in the room advanced on the stricken two.

They were taken away. Some time later they were seated in a space barge, and the captain took a place at their side. Uncaring, they saw the barge slip out into space, and after an interval enter the lock of the other ship.

All three were automatons.

They went up into the control room and stood silent, in a row. Across from them was one who said:

"Mickey, Marta, awake to normality."

CHAPTER XII

Blue Gods—Face to Face

THE two struggled to join the severed threads of consciousness. It did not take them long to realize that this end was the very one they had feared. They looked and looked.

It was almost dark in the room, but their eyes adjusted—enough. The Blue God was there. He was in the captain's chair, some meters away at the bow end. He was another Mickey, hair for hair. And he was blue! His blueness, in the gloom, was frightening.

He half lay in the chair, chin toward his chest, his eyes wide open and head inclined downward toward their feet. For a moment Mickey had the thought he might be ill or wounded. He did not move. He did not even blink. Breathlessly they looked at him.

He seemed to be off his guard, Mickey thought, and, if he was hurt—

"Don't, Mickey," the man said.

This was the voice Mickey had heard in the laboratory!

Mickey didn't. The two stood silently, straining their eyes to make out more detail.

"The sun," murmured this blue god. "The all-mother sun." Still he did not move.

Mickey did not understand, nor could he filter the mixture of emotions with which the oblique words were uttered. This reception was astounding! He found himself afraid to speak!

Marta's hand sought his, and some courage returned.

"Who are you?" he dared ask after a little. "Why do you look so much

like me?"

"You already suspect," said the other, still not moving. "I am your brother. Your twin brother."

Mickey gasped. His lips formed the word soundlessly.

"Yes," said the blue man. "Talber meddled."

"Then—we are mutants?" Mickey asked fearfully.

"I am the mutant," was the answer. The man was silent for a moment, then for the first time he raised his head and faced Mickey. "I cut myself once," he said with intense bitterness, teeth barely separated. "Deeply I cut; deliberately. I am blue, Mickey!—blue all through!" His intensity became terrific. "Blue! Different! Disgusting! Intolerable!"

SLOWLY he subsided, and his head fell to its former position. Mickey dared speak again.

"I think I understand," he said then. "You would overturn a whole civilization in an attempt to establish public tolerance for yourself and your color."

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

"Did you grow up a prisoner in Talber's laboratory?" Mickey asked, guessing. "And then escape, last night?"

The blue man did not speak at once. When he did, he did not answer Mickey's question.

"There were two brothers who had never seen each other," he said. "Now there are two blue gods. One of us must die, Mickey."

By now Mickey expected to die; but if he could somehow reason with the man!

"I think you killed Talber," he said bravely. "If you choose to kill me, I guess I can't prevent it. But why do this to me? Why do it to anyone? Aren't you aware that you're destroying a whole people? Haven't you looked at what you're doing, down on Earth? Don't you know?"

"I know," the man said.

"Then have you no heart? The chaos there is indescribable. Half the population has gone mad trying to reconcile your suggestions with their natural antipathies. They don't deserve anything like that. They're peaceful people. They're good people. They are many, and you are only one. How can you destroy them this way!"

At Mickey's last words the man sat erect, eyes flashing even through the dimness.

"And why should I not?" he thundered. "I am their victim! They would never have allowed me to go among them. They hate mutants—hate any type different from themselves. And why? You're thinking it's only natural —the instinct of a race to survive. But before there was a race there was a type—and the type, too, has this instinct to survive!

"I had done nothing to be treated as I've been. I did not ask Talber to experiment with half of an impregnated ovum. Yet, you, an imbecile, are white, and I, much superior to you all down there—I am a revolting blue! Do you know who your father was?"

"Yes. B-32-L-5, of the old system."

"He was Talber! Ah, you don't like that! Listen.

"Talber loved greatly; the woman died; he wanted a son, and resorted to posthumous conception; and then when you and I, cell to cell lay helpless in his test tube, he could not resist the impulse to divide those cells and experiment with one pitiful half. Oh, he was a good and kind man as your race goes, and I know his motive was only to produce a superior human offspring as he so successfully had done with his plants; but he performed secretely a

criminal act, the most heinous his society knows—and I am his victim!—superior, as he desired, but blue!

"HE PERFORMED other damnable experiments!

"Our mother was an imbecile. You came down unchanged from her. You could be seen by human eyes; allowed to grow up in the sunshine and freedom of the open air; but I? I was blue, a loathesome blue, living evidence of my father's guilt; I had to be hidden away. I do not even have a name! Compassion for your people? Sympathy? Why should I have? Don't you know that such feelings are learned? They're conditioned into people. How was I to be so conditioned?

"I grew up by myself. I grew up alone, an atypical animal in a cage. I had food, the physical necessities, and books; Talber came often to see me when I was young; but that was all. I learned to read almost by myself, when an infant. I learned to speak almost by myself. There were only my books, my small tight room, the artifical light; no fresh air, no lovely sunlight, no contact with others, not one day's beginning of normal growth!

"In spite of this I developed marvelously, and there came a time when I could catch Talber's thoughts, and a day when I attempted to escape. I nearly hypnotized him, but he was lucky and got away, and from that time on Talber, recognizing my potence, kept me more strictly than ever his prisoner. The one thing I had, books, I spent all my time on. I read, I studied, I learned, I remembered everything. I devoured whole libraries. And sometimes, in between, I made plans. There would come a moment when Talber would be careless—and I knew just what I would do.

"Last night that time came. I got out! I locked Talber in the oven—not possessing one insignificant scrap of knowledge, that there was a way he might get out. I did not kill him. I should not for one moment have hesitated to kill him if necessary, but I didn't. He died as a result of his exertions in getting out of the oven. He died before my eyes, trying to get a message through the laboratory window.

"You removed his body while I was below. When I returned and found Talber gone, I went up to the entrance and brought you back in. Then I overcame you too, and locked the door, and spent some time getting from you such information as seemed valuable. And then, then, I walked out into the world which for twenty years had been denied me! I was free! Free and powerful! And I knew just what to do!

"I was kilometers away when Talber returned and blew up the laboratory and all material evidence of his guilt. He hoped to finish me, inside; I caught his thought. But I no longer cared. I knew it would take hours to get him back to the hospital, again revive him, if possible, and then bring up the facts about me—and by that time I couldn't be stopped. That night! It was only last night, but it seems far away in time.

"I took this ship, brought it up here, and constructed a simple piece of apparatus. The sun rose—ah, the inexpressibly warm and beautiful sun, the sun I'd never seen, and which I now beheld for the first time! Can you imagine how I felt? This was my release! This was freedom! I had been a grub, deep in the earth, but now I was an eagle, supreme over all! I dared look into the sun! Yes, I dared look into the sun."

THE man ceased speaking, and slowly slumped down into his former position. Mickey, moved, said

earnestly:

"You could reorient yourself. You could undo most of the damage down on Earth. You could quickly achieve normality, except for your color, and with your powers you should be able to surmount that!"

"It is too late," said the other. He smiled bitterly. "I thought I was an eagle."

"But, Brother"—the word came haltingly from Mickey's lips –"it's not too late. If you are not an eagle, be a man. Come down. Stop this madness. You can adjust. With your powers you can even help make society adjust to you. But not in this mad way! Come down to normality!"

"It's too late," repeated the other, out of great depths of sadness and bitterness. "I have looked into the sun."

Suddenly a tremendous new meaning lit the blue man's words.

"You mean—?" began Mickey.

"Yes," said the other. "I am blind."

"Ah," Mickey breathed.

For a moment there was only silence.

"I came so close, but I was blue. I had learned so much, but had experienced so little. A little thing, a petty, common thing, but I did not know it. I looked into the sun."

Mickey and Marta turned their eyes away from him. They were profoundly touched. The blue man broke the silence again.

"Marta," he called. "Come to me."

She went and stood by his side.

He reached out, fumbled, found her waist and lightly, not objectionably, ran his hands over her figure—up over the strong shoulders to her neck and face and then down past her waist to her knees. His hands fell to his sides.

"And she is to be your mate, Mickey," he said. "I had wanted a mate. One with a mind like my own, and a body like my own. But a white body, not blue all through.

"My days were torture," he went on quietly. "I anticipated. Could I endure a woman with the good brain but puny body of the present race—stifling my need for one of my own kind—blinding her by hypnosis, always, from loathing realization of my color? Would that be worth living through?

"Could I keep on, balancing myself on the unsteady pinnacle of a social structure supported only by my powers of hypnosis? Would that be worth living through?

"I didn't know. I couldn't tell."

LESS and less did the imbecile Mickey know what to say to this man.

The blue man raised his head and pointed to a piece of apparatus functioning at his side.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"No," said Mickey, peering hard.

The only moving part was a metallic cylinder, about fifteen centimeters in each dimension. It revolved rapidly past the poles of what seemed to be an electromagnet, without touching it. Connected in, was a bank of amplifying tubes.

"I had powers, Mickey," the man said sadly, and Mickey noted that he spoke strangely, in the past tense. "No man before has done what I have done with this simple apparatus conceived in my lonely cell, with only books to give it genesis, and no apparatus with which to experiment. My thoughts lie on that steel cylinder. The tubes amplify them. I had only to think the record, then set the cylinder repeating, and all Earth bent to my will."

"I don't understand," Mickey said. "The cylinder is smooth. I see no thought record."

"Still, my thoughts are on it," the

blue man said, "—going powerfully down to Earth, repeating, endlessly repeating. That pair of coils you see is an electromagnet. On the side of the apparatus is a headpiece, which will send through the electromagnet a variable current exactly proportional to the variations of my thought waves. The cylinder, turning past the electromagnet, receives a varying magnetic flux exactly proportional to the current. The cylinder retains its spiral of minute magnetic polarities indefinitely. No intervening mechanical system spoils the transfer; only the cylinder moves. To telecast the message the cylinder is again run past the electromagnet, inducing in it a variable current still proportional to the waves of my thoughts.

"Such a simple thing. Magnetic recording goes far back, but it has always lain deep in obscurity. I adapted it as my means to power."

The blue man bent over and felt the parts of the apparatus. He said gently: "Look how easy it is to remove the message of the Blue God."

Mickey and Marta watched. The man set the magnet at one end of the cylinder and threw a switch. The magnet moved horizontally past the revolving cylinder. Every part was covered.

"I send an erasing current through the magnet," the man said. "The Blue God no longer speaks to the people of Earth."

He looked toward where Mickey was standing and asked:

"Would you like to send them a message?"

Mickey was so surprised that he could not answer.

"You too have powers, Mickey, though you've never discovered them. You have intensity. You could hypnotize people all around you, if you chose to and felt the necessary confidence." He caught Mickey's thought and again smiled faintly. "Very well then. I'd better, anyway."

HE FELT for the headpiece he had mentioned, and fastened it on. For just a moment he paused; then in clear, persuasive tones, he said:

"Children of Earth, the Blue God speaks. I bring you a new message. I am leaving you. The imbecile Mickey will tell you why. He will descend presently among you and you will receive him joyfully, and believe what he has to say, and honor him. He was strong where you were weak, and in his strength he has done you a great service. When I give the word you will resume in full normality your everyday pleasures and duties. It will be as if you awake from a dream. You will forget the Blue God; but you will believe what the imbecile Mickey has to say. Farewell, children of Earth. Now, awake to normality, and go your accustomed ways!"

The blue man threw a switch and re-set the magnet; then he lay back in his chair for a moment head low again in the darkness, the bitterness of total defeat in his sightless eyes. He murmured:

"So passes the blue mutant who did not even have a name . . ."

This was victory for Mickey and Marta, but there were dark currents in their tide of joy.

The man rose, groped his way to the light port. Slowly, through a half circle, he rotated the polarized disc. Thin, straight rays of sunlight cut through the gloom, grew wider and harder, until the light in the room was almost unbearably brilliant. Pitilessly the rays revealed his Mickey's face, with skin of ghastly blue; but, eyes open, he looked out unflinchingly straight at the morning sun.

"The sun is dark," he said.

He moved back the disc and turned away.

"Lead me to the catapult lock, Mickey," he said.

"No!" exclaimed Mickey. "No! No!"

"You will lead me to the catapult lock," he repeated in a different tone.

MICKEY stepped forward and took his brother's hand. Head high, his sightless blue eyes opened wide, the blue man followed him down through the ship to the compartment door. He entered, felt for the space suits kept there, then turned:

"Go back to Marta, then awake," he said and that was all.

Mickey returned and awoke. Marta was pointing to one of the viewing screens.

On it lay the image of a figure clad in a space suit—an image that diminished in size so rapidly that in seconds it was no larger than a doll. A tiny arm moved to the helmet, and the doll exploded.

Still the two kept their eyes on the screen.

"Soon he will be a shooting star," Marta murmured. Mickey added:

"Unseen in the light of the new day."

He looked downward. Near the foot of the screen lay the Blue God's first and only invention. The steel cylinder turned steadily, faithfully sending to Earth his last message.

A uniformed figure, the captain of the M-17, stepped forward. They turned to him, and he saluted. He said:

"Mickey, when it pleases you, we may return to Earth."

THE HOUSE OF FIRE!

Flint slams the switch home! The current hums as it races through the cables, roars as it reaches the electrodes of the arc, splinters in a flashing crash as the arc flames! . . . Desperately Stargen tries to move the chair away. . . It lurches as he presses the controls . . . Flame bathes him in a hellish radiance! Can the egg-headed fiend escape the clutches of his own devilish contrivance in time to direct its heat rays earthward, destroying the Government's TNT plant? . . . Or will he be tricked by the men from earth and "burn in his own juice?" Told in the gripping style of Robert Moore Williams, this great story will have you gasping for breath! Don't miss top-notcher . . . THE HOUSE OF FIRE . . . one of the six outstanding stories in the big, thrill-packed January issue.

JANUARY ISSUE

fantastic ADVENTURES

ON SALE AT NEWSSTANDS EVERYWHERE

PLANET of

She rose from her bed, seemed to take the hand of someone invisible. "I'm coming," she said

Doomed Men

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

DR. RUTLEDGE was in too big a hurry to wait for the elevator. Instead the resident physician used the stairs, going up two steps at a time. And Dawson was right behind him. The well-known psychic investigator was panting after the hurried trip he had made in answer to Rutledge's urgent summons.

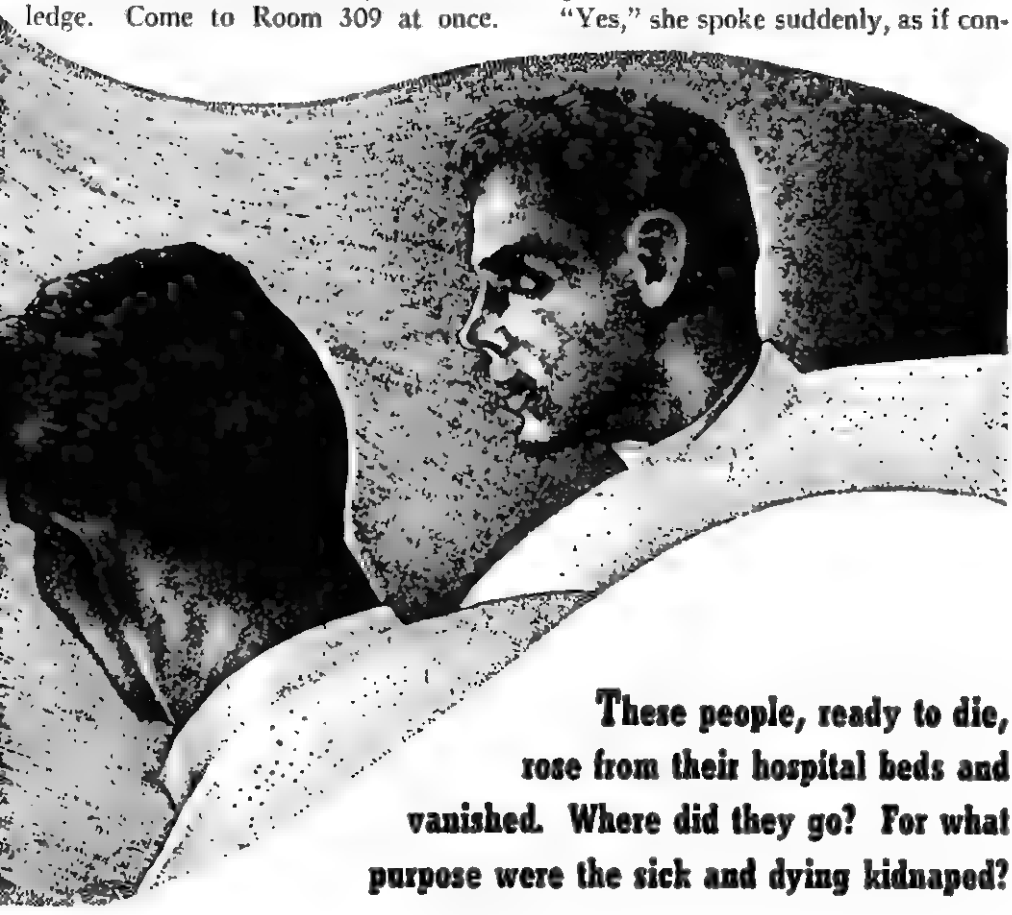
The hospital call system was still whispering huskily, "Calling Dr. Rutledge. Come to Room 309 at once. Urgent. Calling Dr. Rutledge."

Then they were in 309.

Two husky internes were already there. They were huddled together as if for mutual protection. There was also a nurse, her face as white as her uniform.

The patient was sitting up in bed. Her head was tilted a little to one side, and her eyes were fixed on a spot midway between the bed and the window.

"Yes," she spoke suddenly, as if con-



These people, ready to die, rose from their hospital beds and vanished. Where did they go? For what purpose were the sick and dying kidnaped?

tinuing a conversation. "I can see you."

She did not glance toward the two men who had entered. Rutledge took one step inside the room and stopped. Dawson moved past the physician. Sliding his feet along the floor, he maneuvered until he had an unobstructed view, then reached behind him until he touched the wall. Never taking his eyes from the girl, he moved backward until the wall was firm against his back.

Now, if anything attacked him, it could come only from the front, not from behind. He would see it coming. Or even if he didn't see it, it could come from only one direction.

He did not know whether he was in any danger of being attacked. But he did not doubt the presence of danger in this room; for the fixed stare of the girl meant she was *seeing* something, the tilt of her head meant she was *listening* to something.

There was something in the room. The girl saw it. *But neither Dawson nor anyone else could see it!*

"It's happening again," Rutledge spoke nervously out of the corner of his mouth. "You've got to stop it."

"I will if I can," Dawson answered. He had just arrived at the hospital, in answer to a phone call from Rutledge, when the call to come to 309 had sounded. Consequently he knew nothing of what had happened. All he knew was that Rutledge was frightened. And that was bad, for Rutledge looked like a tough-minded skeptic who didn't scare easily. He had the jaw of a fighter. Doctors usually aren't afraid of death. They see too much of it to fear it. But Rutledge was scared. Well, then, if death couldn't scare him—what could?

Dawson watched the girl. She was about twenty-three, with a delicate attractive face. A haunted face now, but there was still strength in it. On the foot of the bed a record sheet was hanging, with her name on it—Mary Nolan.

THE girl spoke again. But she wasn't speaking to the internes, to the nurse, to Rutledge or to Dawson!

Dawson suddenly felt cold, colder than he had ever been before. Search the room as he might, he could not see the person to whom she must be talking. Or had his eyes seized this moment to play tricks on his brain—

"Did you come for me?" the girl was asking. She waited for an answer, her head tilted a little to one side.

Out of the corners of his eyes, Dawson saw the two internes and the nurse holding their breath. Rutledge stood with his mouth open, his face blank with bewildered fear. He couldn't tear his eyes off Mary Nolan. Dawson wondered what Rutledge saw. Something about the girl baffled the physician even more than the fact that she was obviously talking to an invisible creature.

"But I don't understand," Mary Nolan was saying. "The Master needs me? Why?"

Some way, somehow, although Dawson heard nothing, her question was answered. Her face reflected awe and wonder.

"But what if I don't want to go with you? What if I choose to remain here?"

"—Oh! I don't have any choice." She wasn't scared. She was puzzled and her temper was rising. "You can't come in here and give me orders! I do have a choice. I choose to remain here. What do you say to that?"

"—But I can't!" Her temper was gone. She was unnerved now; her voice dropped in pitch. Terror showed starkly on her face. Bewildered terror. Utter terror.

"I can go with you—or stay here and die! That's the choice I have! But

how do you know—Yes, yes, I am to be operated on tomorrow. You could have learned that here at the hospital. But how can you be certain I'm going to—to die when they operate on me?"

Dawson felt his heart turn over and stop beating for a second, then resume with a mad thump in his chest. Rutledge's face was pasty gray. The internes were trembling. The nurse gulped, and slid to the floor in a faint. No one moved to help her. No one even noticed.

Mary Nolan spoke again, her voice a thin whisper now, without hope.

"You *do* know! If they operate on me tomorrow, I *will* die. I can *see* it—the operating room, the nurses, the mask for the ether, the scalpels. I can see myself on the operating table, still and silent, the doctors trying to revive me—and failing! I can see myself lying dead—You *do* know, don't you? You're not playing with me, scaring me. You're telling me the truth. I *am* going to die tomorrow!"

Seconds ticked away into nothingness as hopeless despondency stamped itself on her face. Then little by little it went away, and she tried to smile.

Here was courage, the only real courage. The courage to smile at death!

"But I would rather die than—have my operation fail. Death I can face; life I cannot face if my operation fails. So you have not frightened me by telling me that I am to die—"

Something interrupted the girl. She seemed to listen. Her voice grew a little stronger.

"You were not trying to frighten me. You are trying to explain . . . Oh—I understand. Yes, yes—"

Awe crept into Mary Nolan's voice, and a bewildered understanding. Whatever it was that she was being told, it left her momentarily speechless.

"Yes, I will go," she said after a painful interlude. "Yes. Nothing but death is here for me. Yes, I will go—with you."

THE girl slid slim legs over the edge of the bed, swayed a little as she stood erect. No one moved as she walked across the room, took her clothes from a closet and dressed. Then she shyly extended her right hand, closed her fingers on an invisible object and started toward the door.

Rutledge broke the spell that had held them all motionless. "Seize her!" he snapped at the two internes. "She must not leave the hospital in her condition."

The two internes leaped to obey him. Dawson, his back against the wall, did not move. All over his body cold winds were playing.

The internes caught the girl, turned her roughly around. And then—then something seized them! Their husky bodies jerked as if they had touched live wires. Dawson, heart pounding, was positive no *physical* force had blocked them. Their hands seemed to leap away from the girl, their legs to fold up under them. They fell heavily to the floor.

But Mary Nolan continued on toward the door. She took two steps and Rutledge stepped in front of her. Dawson knew then that he had judged the physician correctly. Rutledge had seen what happened to the internes, but he was a fighter by nature. Yet he didn't try to use force at first.

"Miss Nolan," Rutledge said, his voice the calm tone that doctors use with patients who are not in their right minds. "You know you can't leave the hospital. It's raining outside and you might catch cold. Besides, it's night now. Why not wait until tomorrow morning? It will be time enough then."

The girl didn't seem to hear him or

to see him. She stopped, but otherwise she gave no indication of the physician's presence.

Rutledge continued talking to her.

"Please step aside," she said abruptly.

"But Miss Nolan—"

"I said to step aside! I know what I'm doing."

"I doubt it," Rutledge snapped, losing his temper. "You're not leaving this hospital in your present condition. You're going back to bed if I have to put you there. Come, now! No more of this stupid argument. Back to bed with you."

He took her arm. Instantly he jerked his hand away, a look of pained surprise flashing over his face. Almost bonelessly his legs buckled under him, and he collapsed limply to the floor, faint and sweat-soaked.

Mary Nolan walked out the door as though nothing at all had happened.

"Stop her, man!" Rutledge cried weakly to Dawson. "Don't let her leave!"

"Do you think I'm a fool?" said Dawson quietly. "I can't stop her any more than you could. She has a guardian, and against that guardian I am as a slab of jelly. The best I can do is follow her and see what happens."

Mary Nolan walked down the stairs and out the front door of the hospital into the night, her right hand still extended at her side in an unnatural position. A couple of people on the sidewalk stared as the girl walked by. An ambulance attendant started, made as if to hurry from his seat in the conveyance and catch the girl.

Dawson gestured quickly to him to stay where he was. Then, his face absolutely expressionless, he trailed on silent, unobtrusive feet after the girl. If he had any conception of the risk he was taking, that knowledge was not revealed in his quiet, chiseled features.

Not such a mask was the light that shone in his steady gray eyes.

CHAPTER II

Three Who Vanished

IN FRONT of the hospital, Mary Nolan turned to the right and walked a block and a half. Then to Dawson's surprise, she turned up an alley. Ahead a single flaring light cast a dim circle of illumination. The girl's body was outlined against the light. Dawson followed her, keeping close to the wall of the building. The alley had a dead end. Mary Nolan stopped under the light. Dawson flattened himself against the building, his mind racing. Why had she come here? Where was she going? Even more important, what incredible creature guarded her, talked to her, was visible to her alone? What weird pattern was being traced here in the murk of this rainy night?

Dawson heard her voice then. He shivered, refusing to believe his ears, and thrust himself deeper into the shadows. He felt his muscles trembling, willed them to be still. Mary Nolan called again. He swallowed, and stepped forward.

There was no point now in trying to hide. She knew he was there. She could see him even in the darkness. Again she was calling to him. "Don't be afraid, Mr. Dawson."

He had never seen her before—but she knew his name!

"I'm not afraid," he said gruffly. "I may be scared more than half to death, but I'm still not afraid."

The girl's eyes fixed him with terrible intensity. She smiled.

"I see you're not," she said. "And that is very good. We need men who are stronger than fear."

Her words jarred him unpleasantly. "What do you mean?" he growled, his voice purposefully harsh.

"Don't snarl at me. I don't like it," Mary Nolan retorted. "As to my meaning, I'm not sure I have any. All I know is that something wonderful has happened."

"Something wonderful?" Dawson snapped. Then, more patiently, "You're getting wet, girl. Better come back to the hospital"

Her voice was altogether too assured. "I'm not going back to that or any other hospital. Never. I'm going to another world. And you're coming too, I think."

Dawson started, but kept his mind under rigid control. It was the only way. He could not let himself even think about what Mary Nolan was saying.

"You're going to catch your death of cold if you don't get out of this rain," he warned.

"Pouf!" she said. "You growl but you don't mean it. You do it because you know if you do anything else, fear will eat you up. I'm doing the same thing, Mr. Dawson—and for the same reason."

At that Dawson broke out in a cold sweat. But the girl's attention was distracted. She seemed to be listening—

"I must go," Mary Nolan said abruptly "There is not much time. But before I go—Did you ever kiss a girl, Mr. Dawson? Ever before, I mean?"

THE question was so out of place, it almost shattered Dawson's remaining control.

"No," he answered involuntarily. Then he colored violently. For it was the truth. Dawson had been on earth thirty-three years, yet he hadn't kissed a girl since he'd been a kid.

"I thought so," said Mary Nolan. "And there's a reason, isn't there? One that nobodys knows but you. Two reasons, maybe. And they're both good reasons, too. I'm sorry about one—and glad about the other."

"Talk sense," Dawson snapped. Inwardly he was terribly frightened. Could the girl read his mind, he wondered. Otherwise, how did she know his name? How did she know that one terrible reason why he had never kissed a girl?

"Would you mind so much kissing me right now?"

Dawson literally jumped at the words. But Mary Nolan didn't wait for his answer. She moved forward and her mouth was raised. Rain splashed across her forehead. Her lips were soft and sweet.

Dawson groaned. In spite of all he could do to prevent it, his arms went around her. He felt the pressure of her lithe body beneath his fingers—

Simultaneously the deep note of a plucked harp sounded. The air rippled with the sound. A soft golden light pulsed momentarily. A door opened outward, an incredible door that was like no other door ever found on earth.

The note of the plucked harp died. The light was gone and the door was closed. Dawson's arms closed about—nothing.

Mary Nolan was gone.

Dawson felt her leave, felt his arms grow limp. He stood without moving, scarely breathing, listening, watching. He heard nothing, he saw nothing. The alley was silent and deserted.

Grim hard knots bulged the corners of Dawson's jaw. He reached into an inside pocket, pulled out a tiny flashlight that he always carried. He searched the alley, found it reached a dead end in a blank wall. On his left was a warehouse. All the doors were

locked and barred. On the right was the empty wall of a building.

There was no way Mary Nolan could have escaped. But she was gone.

Oblivious of the rain, now coming down in torrents, Dawson strode back to the hospital, his mind seething with contradictions. A man was waiting for him beside the information desk. He glanced up at Dawson and came quickly to his feet.

"Hello. You're George Dawson, aren't you?"

Dawson blinked almost angrily. "I suppose you're a reporter. No need to ask how you knew me, in that event."

The newshawk grinned. "Reporters have to know a little bit of everything, you know. I read a book of yours. Had your picture in it. That's how I recognized you. You're president of the American Society for the Investigation of Psychic Phenomena, aren't you? A ghost hunter, eh? Well, I enjoyed your book, but the stuff you fellows do gives me the creeps. Spending nights in haunted houses chasing spooks, exposing fake mediums—"

The reporter rattled on. Dawson let him talk. He wanted to know what the man was doing at the hospital.

Finally the newshawk came to the point. "Say, we got a hot tip that there's something doing down here. A ghost of some kind is on the loose, and people are putting on a disappearing act. Seeing you down here makes me think there must be something to it. How about it? What's the lowdown?"

Dawson shook his head. "Somebody must have given you the wrong tip, buddy. There's nothing like that here." He started to walk away.

"Yeah? What are you doing down here, then?" the reporter demanded.

"Oh, Dr. Rutledge is an old friend of mine. I just dropped in to visit him," Dawson lied.

The reporter's lip curled. "And while he was busy, you walked around the block in the rain, I suppose. Look at you; your clothes are all wet. There's a story here and you're trying to deny it. Come on, Mr. Dawson. Give!"

"No story, buddy. Sorry."

Dawson strode determinedly away. The reporter stared after him with a half angry, half suspicious frown.

A MOMENT later Dawson entered Rutledge's office without knocking. The resident physician jumped. Then he saw who it was and went on pouring whiskey. Dawson carefully closed the door.

"There's a reporter out here," he said. "Have you talked to him?"

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Rutledge answered. "I haven't talked to him and I don't intend to."

"Good. If this thing should get out, it would scare a lot of people out of their wits. Whatever else this situation may need, it doesn't need publicity."

"Then you think this ghost is real?"

"I don't think it," Dawson answered. "I *know* it!"

Dawson slumped in a chair and mopped his brow, sweat mingling with the sheen of rain on his face. Rutledge's shaky hands finally managed to get a stiff bracer of whiskey into the glass, and he downed the stuff in one gulp. Not that it did much good, because his hands went right on shaking.

"This is absolutely the damnedest thing in my whole experience," Rutledge muttered when Dawson had finished his account. "Man, we've got to do something about this. Haven't you any idea what started it all?"

Dawson's eyes were brooding. "Something came into that girl's room. It must have been between four and five feet tall."

Rutledge's eyes widened. "But *you*

didn't see it! I mean—"

"I followed the line of her gaze. She looked straight across the room, and since a person naturally looks at the face of a visitor, the level of her eyes determined the height of what she saw. She talked to this visitor. We heard what *she* said, but we didn't hear what *it* told her. But *it* convinced her that she should go with *it*, somewhere, and when she walked out of the room she was holding *its* hand. That's obvious because her hand was extended."

"Eh? What's that? Something came and took her by the hand!" Rutledge exclaimed.

"I don't see what other reason she could have had for holding her right arm out from her body," Dawson repeated.

"My God!" the physician whispered. "I noticed that too, but I didn't realize what it meant."

"And then," Dawson continued grimly, "either I was the victim of an hallucination—or Mary Nolan walked right off the face of the earth."

"IT'S incredible!" Rutledge whispered. "Utterly incredible."

He downed another bracer of whiskey. Dawson felt sorry for the man. He knew how the doctor was suffering, knew only too well.

"Those are the facts in the case of Mary Nolan," he went on. "Now tell me—was she due to undergo an operation tomorrow?"

"Yes," the husky answer came. "So help me God, she was. And I—I was to do the operating. We were to open the brain case and remove the pressure on the optic nerve that had caused her blindness."

"Blindness?" Dawson almost shouted. "Was she *blind?"*

"Stone blind," Rutledge told him. "Not the slightest response in either eye. Heavens, man, I forgot you didn't know, but that's one of the things that has been driving me almost insane. For when she walked out of that room, her movements, her actions, everything—indicated that she could see!"

Dawson had risen from his chair. Momentarily even his practical control was shattered.

"See? Of course she could see! She saw me, when I was hiding in the dark. Oh, Lord, this is a miracle! The blind miraculously regaining their sight—"

"Yes," Rutledge muttered thickly. "And the lame walk, and the hopelessly doomed find new strength and laugh at death and—disappear! You talk of a miracle. Listen while I tell you about two more of them! Would have told you before, but there wasn't any time."

Rutledge got a grip on himself.

"The first one occurred five days ago," he began. "We had a nineteen-year-old youth in the hospital, with a case of paralysis resulting from spinal meningitis. The muscles of the left leg had atrophied. He could walk, but only with a crutch. We were going to operate. The night before the operation the nurse on the floor called me to his room. She thought he was having a fit. He had got out of bed and had dressed himself.

"I was so dumfounded at seeing him walk that I didn't try to stop him. He walked out of the hospital and I haven't seen him since. Nor has anyone else. He didn't go home. I notified the police that he was missing, hired a detective —" The physician faltered, shrugged helplessly. "Well, we haven't found him."

"Hm-m," said Dawson. Thoughts raced through his mind. "What was the next case?"

"A woman of twenty-eight, a Miss Jennie West. Malignant carcinoma—cancer—of the stomach. Inoperable.

No hope. She had perhaps two weeks to live and not enough strength left to lift her hand."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know," Rutledge said blankly. "When the night nurse entered her room on a routine inspection, the patient was gone. Whether she left the hospital or vanished into thin air, we don't know. We made inquiries, but with no results. She lived with a sister, but her sister says she didn't return there. The police can't find her."

"IS THAT all?" Dawson questioned.

"All?" The physician's face purpled. "Damn it, man, isn't that enough? Three people—gone—" He choked.

"Did Miss West have a chance to recover?" Dawson asked quietly.

"I told you she didn't! There was nothing medical science could do to save her," Rutledge snapped.

"And Mary Nolan. She was told she was going to die tomorrow. Was that the truth?"

"I don't know. But a brain operation is always dangerous. One slip of the knife—"

Rutledge shuddered, and Dawson knew the reason for the convulsive shiver that passed over the physician's body. Rutledge himself would have been handling that knife—

Dawson sighed a little tiredly. "She said she would rather die than have her operation fail. Why would she say that?"

"She was an artist, and she loved her work. You can imagine what the loss of sight would mean to an artist."

"Yes," Dawson nodded slowly. "I can." He drummed his fingers together a moment. "Now, this boy you mentioned—what was his name by the way—was this operation dangerous? Was there a chance that he would die from its effects? You know—that nineteen-year-old youngster."

Rutledge fumbled with the whiskey. "Any operation is a risk." His voice rose nervously. "Why do you ask that? Why do you sit there and ask questions? Why in hell don't you *do* something? This has *got* to be stopped! These people have to be found—"

Dawson held up a restraining hand. "Take it easy, take it easy. I asked that question to establish a fact, and I think your answer does just that."

"What fact? What are you talking about?" Rutledge demanded irritably.

"That this ghost is appearing only to people on the verge of death, people who are doomed. Miss West didn't have a chance to recover. Mary Nolan would have died on the operating table. So would this boy, in all probability. Therefore, this ghost is taking with him only those who are about to die."

Rutledge stared at him blankly. "What good does that do?"

"It might do some good—if you'd tell me the truth."

"I *am* telling you the truth!" the physician blazed hotly. "Don't you sit there and call *me* a liar! I'm telling you the truth," he protested again.

"You're not," Dawson challenged. "Rutledge, you're holding out on me. You're telling me part of the truth, but you're keeping something else back. Your whole manner shows it. You shouted at me that I've got to stop this business. Why is it so important to *you* to have it stopped? What's your personal stake in this?"

The physician half rose from his chair, his face gray with anger. Dawson stared at him imperturbably. Rutledge sank back into his chair after a moment, wiping his sweating face.

"I didn't mean to tell you this," he said shakily. "I meant to maintain the proper professional attitude, to say that

my interest in having this thing stopped was solely because these people were my patients. But I'll tell you the truth, I'll tell you why I say these people have to be found because this nineteen-year-old spinal meningitis victim was my own son!"

Rutledge broke down completely. "That's the personal reason I've got at stake. My son is gone. And I want him back. Do you understand, I want him back! Just thinking what may have happened to him is driving me almost insane. I've got to have Jack back. Can't you understand that?"

Rutledge laid his head on the desk and sobbed unashamed.

"Oh," said Dawson softly. He got up and walked around the desk. His fingers gently gripped the physician's shoulder.

"We'll get him back," he said. "Or we'll go with him. We'll get them both back—or go where they have gone. I've got a personal interest at stake, too."

CHAPTER III

To Trap a Ghost

THERE was a small basement room in the hospital which Dawson appropriated for his own. To it he had brought armload after armload of equipment. He had three different automatic cameras, one taking pictures by infra-red light, the second by ultra-violet, and the third by ordinary means. He had in addition an adaptation of a Geiger Counter, a device designed to record the impact of cosmic rays.

Dawson had altered the device so that it was no longer a trap for cosmic rays. He hoped that all four pieces of apparatus would present a formidable trap for a ghost. Unfortunately it hadn't worked out that way.

Occupied at the moment, developing the film from the cameras, Dawson was trying hard not to think. He especially didn't want to remember what he had just seen.

Four days had just passed, four terrible days during which he had fought to solve the mystery of that incredible phantom that haunted the hospital. Tried—and failed.

For in the meantime three more people had vanished. The first two, overpowering all efforts to halt them, had walked out of the hospital—and then off the face of the earth. That was bad enough, but it was the third patient that had disturbed Dawson more than he cared to admit.

This one hadn't walked out of the hospital. He had been held in a special room, with doors and windows barred on the inside. He had been put in a strait-jacket. His name had been Roy Glenn.

Dawson felt ill every time he remembered the disease from which Roy Glenn had been suffering. Rabies—the final stage when Glenn reached the hospital. Bitten by a pet dog. No hope. Absolutely nothing that could be done to save him. In its first stages, rabies could be cured. But once it had reached its final stage, medical science could do nothing—except to put the sufferer in a strait-jacket and hope the end was not far off.

Dawson and Dr. Rutledge had been present, and four internes. Roy Glenn, trussed up like a madman in a room that was locked and barred, had twisted and strained as he tried to free himself, had begged them to do something—anything—to ease his suffering.

They weren't able to do anything But *something* else apparently was—

Roy Glenn had suddenly quit fighting the straps that held him. His eyes had focused on an impalpable vision—

No one else had seen or heard any-

thing. But Roy had.

He tried to get out of bed and follow it. The strait-jacket held him back. He fought, but the straps were unyielding, uncompromising. Frantically he begged to be released.

It had taken real courage to resist his pitiful cries. But resist they had. Roy Glenn had fallen back on the bed, seemingly drained of further strength.

Bong!

The note of a harp sounded. There was a flash of golden light, the webbing of the strait-jacket fell in upon itself, the bed sheets collapsed.

The bed was empty! Roy Glenn was gone. Out of a strait-jacket, out of a locked, barred room, and in the presence of six witnesses!

DAWSON'S three cameras had recorded the whole scene. All his ghost traps had been in operation.

Gray and haggard, Rutledge had dragged himself back to his office and Dawson had come down to this basement room to develop the films he had exposed, to check the records of his other instruments.

He developed the three different films, one taken by ultra-violet light, the second by infra-red, the third by ordinary light, and ran them through a projector. What he found left him tremendously disturbed.

Roy Glenn's last struggles were on the film. Rather, *only* his last struggles. Whatever it was that had entered the room, it did not record on camera film. One picture showed Glenn in his strait-jacket, the second caught the flash of Golden light. In the next Roy Glenn was gone altogether.

Dawson checked the record tape on the Geiger Counter. He found nothing.

His ghost traps had failed completely.

For a long time he sat thinking. He heard people passing in the corridors overhead. Once he caught a chorus of excited voices, but he paid them no attention.

This "ghost"—was it indeed an apparation visible to one person but not visible to another? It eluded even a camera. Yet its existence was undeniable. And it had power; enough enough power to make its victims disappear, enough power to render senseless anyone attempting to restrain a victim of its own peculiar choice.

Dawson, head of an organization devoted to investigating all phases of psychic phenomena, from extra-sensory perception to spectral illusions, knew that literature was filled with allusions to ghosts. In most cases, he believed these apparitions were products of an overworked imagination. But there were other instances where unquestionably a supernatural agency had been involved.

A supernatural agency was at work here. But what was its purpose? Why was it stealing defenseless human beings? Worse still—where was it taking them? Where had it taken—Dawson winced—Mary Nolan?

A step sounded suddenly in the corridor outside. The door opened. Dawson glanced frowning at the figure of Dr. Rutledge.

The physician was calmer than he had been at any time during the past four days. The haggard lines of fear were gone from his face. With one hand thrust in the pocket of his white jacket, a newspaper under the other arm, he looked almost cheerful.

"What have you found out?" he questioned, nodding toward the cameras.

"Nothing. Not a thing," Dawson said shortly.

"Um. Well, it doesn't matter now. Hell's already broken loose."

"What's that?" Dawson snapped.

Rutledge handed him the paper.

THERE it was, on the front page. As Dawson read it, something cold turned over inside him.

MEDICAL SOCIETY ON WARPATH
AS FORTY PATIENTS DISAPPEAR
MYSTERIOUSLY FROM HOSPITALS

The County Medical Society was in an uproar today, after a tabulation which revealed that in the past ten days, some forty patients, the majority of them desperately ill, had vanished completely from local hospitals under circumstances reportedly bordering on the supernatural.

Nine patients are said to have disappeared from city hospital Number 1, twelve from Number 3, six from Johnson Memorial Hospital, ten from the Sherman Home for Bone Diseases, and three from the hospital of the Wright Pathological Institute.

In an interview which he granted reporters after keeping them waiting two hours, Dr. Morris K. Fishman, secretary of the County Medical Society, angrily denied that the Society as a whole was responsible for the mysterious disappearances.

"There will of course be a complete investigation," Dr. Fishman stated. "To say that these patients have disappeared, vanished is ridiculous. Nobody simply disappears just like that. However, I shall take steps to see that the individual doctors responsible for permitting patients to leave hospitals are severely reprimanded. Some may even have their licenses to practice medicine suspended, or revoked."

A reporter asked what would happen in the event a physician could prove that a patient under his care had vanished without permission.

Dr. Fishman declared that the question was impertinent and retired into his office, declining to answer any more queries.

It is understood that a group of local physicians held "responsible" for the disappearances have secured an attorney to protect their rights, and will appeal to the State Supreme Court to forestall any attempt to revoke their licenses to practice medicine.

"What utter nonsense!" Dawson exclaimed when he had finished the account. "How could any doctor stop a patient from turning into a—a ghost! Why, I myself saw some of these people vanish! I'll testify in your behalf too, Dr. Rutledge."

Rutledge seemed unaccountably complacent. "I'm afraid it wouldn't do any good, Dawson. People don't believe in ghosts in this country anyway, not until they've 'seen' them; and then they put it down as an hallucination.

"Good heavens, man, don't bother your head about me. Let me worry about myself, as a doctor should. It's better that we start worrying about those forty missing people. Now, is there anything you can do for them, any way to find what's happened to them?"

Dawson shook his head. The news had shocked him so profoundly that he wasn't thinking clearly. *Forty* people gone! Vanished! And the story spread all over the front pages.

"I could wring that reporter's neck," Dawson said savagely. "There's a lunatice fringe in this country that will go crazy when they read this story. There will be a panic here in Chicago before the world is a day older."

"There already is," Rutledge admitted. "Some of our patients here in the hospital got hold of this paper. We had kept it from them until then, and I had given the internes and the nurses strict orders not to talk. As soon as

they read the story, all the patients who were able to walk cleared out. And the staff went with them.

Dawson was incredulous. "You mean to tell me the doctors and the nurses have deserted their posts?"

"Right. I don't blame them. They're scared. This thing has been taking only the dying, but for all they know it may start on the living next. Since it seems to haunt hospitals, they've cleared out."

The resident physician looked speculatively at Dawson. "Is there anything you can do, any suggestion you can make, as to how we can stop this, or find out what's happened to the people who have been taken?"

"If there was anything, I'd be doing it," Dawson answered hopelessly. "I'm stumped. I don't know which way to turn. This thing is utterly beyond me."

"Are you sure?" the physician insisted.

"Of course. Say, what's come over you anyhow? A couple of hours ago you were the worst-scared man I've ever seen. Now you're just the opposite. You're calm. Have you been holding out on me?" Dawson rose angrily to his feet.

"Have you discovered something about this infernal business that you haven't told me?"

Rutledge maintained his poise. "Yes, I've thought of something. I've thought of a way to help the people who have vanished."

"You have!" The words jerked from Dawson's lips with explosive force. "Hell, man, tell me what it is!"

Rutledge took his hand out of his pocket. He held up a small round cardboard box, of the kind frequently used to contain capsules. There was a single capsule in it now. He held the box so Dawson could see it. The object glittered under the light.

"The secret to the solution of the whole affair is right in that capsule," he said.

HAD the man gone mad, Dawson wondered. Had his mind cracked under the strain? Then he guessed the secret of that capsule and leaped toward Rutledge. But the physician was too fast for him.

"You get ideas quickly," he said. "But you didn't get this one quickly enough."

Like a man taking an aspirin, Rutledge popped the capsule into his mouth and gulped it down.

"In about twenty minutes," he said, "if that ghost only comes for the dying, I'll know how to solve this business."

Dawson's eyes were horrified.

"You've taken poison," he whispered. "You're deliberately committing suicide, hoping that this ghost will come for you."

Rutledge shrugged a little tiredly. "I said you get ideas quickly. You've got this one. I *am* committing suicide. You said you didn't know of any other way."

"I don't. But you're taking an awful chance. Supposing this ghost doesn't come for you."

"Then," said Rutledge, sinking into a chair, "I'll die."

Dawson could only stare at the other. "You're a brave man," he said finally. "The world can't well afford to lose you. And," he added grimly, "it doesn't have to lose you! For every poison there's an antidote."

"Not for this one." Thin beads of sweat were beginning to appear on Rutledge's forehead. "I'm a doctor and I ought to know."

"Then we'll try an emetic and a stomach pump," Dawson said tightly.

He started toward the door. He took one step—and deep within his body, in the region of his chest about the heart,

there was a spasmodic contraction. Pain, coming suddenly, drove through him like the thrust of a knife. Sparks danced before his eyes. He fell to one knee, fought for breath as the first spasm rolled a wave of red agony over his body.

It subsided, then, but the pounding ache was a furious thing. Dawson knew what had happened. He dragged himself to a chair.

"I guess," he whispered weakly, "I won't be able to use that stomach pump on you after all."

"Heart?" Rutledge asked softly.

"Yes . . . How—how did you know?"

"You've got all the symptoms. How long has it been bad?"

"Years," Dawson answered. "I've seen five doctors — They all said — it couldn't be cured—that I might live ten minutes—or ten years. Had a light attack—about a month ago. The doctors said the next one—would be the last. . . . I guess the strain of watching you commit suicide—was too much—"

That was the reason Dawson had never kissed a girl, the reason Mary Nolan seemed to have penetrated. His heart might quit beating at any minute. He couldn't honestly ask a girl to marry him when he knew he was already living on borrowed time.

Now the end of that borrowed time had come. Pains like red-hot needles were tearing through his chest. Cold sweat broke out all over his body.

"I'M sorry, old man," Rutldege said, "damned sorry. You oughtn't to have been a ghost hunter, you know, with a heart like that. Too much strain."

Dawson gestured weakly. "Oh, I could control it—as long as I didn't let myself get excited. That was the reason—a ghost couldn't scare me. I knew if I let myself be afraid—my heart would act up."

He slid limply off the chair then and sprawled full length on the floor.

"So long, Rutledge. I'll see you—"

DAWSON looked up. The door hadn't opened, but something had entered the room –a man!

Or was it a man? He looked human and yet he looked—oddly *un*human. He was about five feet tall. Clad in a jacket of some sort, wearing sandals, bareheaded, he stood there and looked down at Dawson with utterly impersonal eyes. His face seemed as though it had been modeled by a classic sculptor. The features were chiseled, perfect.

"Yes," he said, and there was a sigh in the words, a sigh heard as from far off. "I am perfect—with one fatal exception."

"You read my thoughts!" Dawson gasped.

"Of course," the answer came. "Otherwise, how would I have known your name? How would I, on another occasion, have known you were hiding in the darkness watching a girl you had followed?"

"Who—who are you?" Dawson whispered.

"You may call me Karmak."

Dr. Rutledge breathed a sigh that might have indicated relief. "I take it you've come for us," said he.

Karmak nodded silently.

The ghost had come again. And with him came—darkness.

CHAPTER IV

Other World

THE first thing George Dawson noticed was the quietness. There was no sound, no noise. A big city is never completely quiet. But here there was utter silence.

Dawson opened his eyes. He sat up, and found he was lying in a bed of some sort, but it was not *his* bed. He remembered, vaguely, that he had been dreaming.

He had been in a hospital, seeking a phantom, and a physician had committed suicide, and Dawson's weak heart had started throbbing. The memory of that agonizing pain jarred him to complete wakefulness. That was no dream. He *had* had a heart attack. . . .

He was wearing a brown jacket now and brown shorts. He opened the jacket, felt of his heart. It was beating rhythmatically, sturdily, as strong as if there had never been any leakage. And down his left breast was a long white line, a line that had not been there before. It looked—why, it looked a little like the mark left by a surgeon's scalpel!

Dawson knew instantly what had happened. The knowledge left him breathless.

"I've been cured," he muttered softly. "I've had an operation—"

A sound jerked his head around. There was another bed in the room. In it, Rutledge was sitting up. He had heard what Dawson said.

"On earth," the physician commented, "we didn't cure hearts that were as bad as yours. Nor," he added, "did we have an antidote for certain poisons. And that means—"

Rutledge shook his head. There was a window in the room and it attracted his eyes. He got up, walked to the window, looked out — and recoiled in awed amazement.

"Come and see!" he exclaimed. "Come and see!"

Dawson got up and went to his side. A moment later a whistle of incredulous amazement burst from his lips.

A city lay before them. And what a city! Designed by a master architect who knew the effect of every curve, the sparkle that could be produced by sharp towers, the secret of every color! Built by an engineer who knew the strength of every metal, the loading of every arch!

Majestic, inspiring, almost ethereal, the city rose regally into the sky, towering for hundreds of stories above the surface below.

It stretched away into the distance mile after mile, a city of gargantuan proportions in which every detail was as true and as perfect as if it had been carved by a craftsman in precious gems.

A city of Titans, a city of supreme engineers. Dawson's eyes ran over it, incredulous, amazed. And then, far off to the left, he saw something that chilled his blood and started his nerves to rasping.

"Bombs!" he told himself bitterly. "Only bombs could cause wreckage like that."

For in that region the lofty spires were twisted and torn, and holes gaped in all the buildings.

Dawson looked upward. There was a reddish sun overhead, and in the sky a dark blot hung motionless. While he watched it began to move away to the south.

"Hm-m—was that a ship?" Rutledge mused.

"It must have been," Dawson replied.

He put the ship out of his mind and again searched the city. Something else was wrong—very much wrong indeed!

There were no people in sight!

"WHAT'S happened to the inhabitants?" Rutledge demanded.

Dawson could not answer him. Ramps, obviously designed for pedestrians, stretched away in all directions. But nothing alive moved on the ramps. He saw dozens of flat roofs—landing

fields— but no planes in sight. There were no airships anywhere, nothing except that one dark ominous blot that had moved out of sight toward the south.

Rutledge turned from the window, glancing toward the door. "I thought I heard someone walking," he said. "There it is again! Hear it?"

Soft footsteps were clearly audible on the other side of the door.

"Wait," Rutledge warned when Dawson started forward. "We don't know what it is. It might be almost anything."

Dawson paused, his hand on the doorknob. The physician was right. Anything might be out there. As he hesitated, the footsteps came nearer. Then, under his hand the knob began to turn—

Dawson yanked the door open. A youth tumbled into the room. The psychic investigator grabbed him.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"Why—I—" It was only a boy. He stared at Dawson from frightened eyes. Then he saw Rutledge, and gasped a single word.

"Dad!"

"Jack!" Rutledge cried. "Oh, my boy, I've found you again at last!"

The two rushed unashamedly into each other's arms. Jack Rutledge was a handsome youngster, tall well-proportioned, eager for life and all its promises. There were honest tears in the eyes of both father and son; tears which revealed that for all his cyncism, the middle-aged physician was underneath it all a man who had wrapped about himself a mantle of brusqueness to ward off the pressure of responsibility and the barbs of jealous critics.

Finally Rutledge turned to Dawson, a new light in his eyes.

"My son," he said proudly. "Not a bad looker, eh? A chip off the old block, what?"

"Well, not quite so hard a chip," Dawson muttered, and clasped the youth's outstretched hand warmly.

"Look at this leg," Jack Rutledge said happily. "It's as sound as the other one."

He kicked with it, pranced on it, swung it up for inspection.

His father's face grew serious again. He poked his fingers into the leg muscles, felt the knee joint, pounded on the knee cap to test the nervous reaction.

THERE was wonder in Rutledge's eyes. "The tissues have been restored completely. A perfect job. Dawson, your heart, Jack's leg, and my faith in life—fellow, in this world there are some super-surgeons!"

"In *this* world, yes," Dawson agreed. "Where you find super-engineers and super-architects, you will also find super-surgeons. And now I know why Karmak took the crippled and the maimed, people who were dying. Because in this world there are surgeons who can make them well. . . ."

He paused, and when he spoke again there was perplexity in his voice.

"But who and what is Karmak? What does he want with us? And where are we, anyway?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Jack Rutledge spoke up. All I remember is going to sleep in the hospital. I had a funny sort of dream. A strange little man came for me. He told me to follow him, made me *want* to follow him. I followed him and then I went to sleep again. I don't know how long I slept, but when I woke up, I found my leg had been cured.

"At first I thought Dad operated on me while I was asleep, but then I discovered I wasn't in the hospital. I called and no one came. So I got up to look for someone. Dad—what *really*

happened?"

Rutledge tried to explain. But his voice faltered. "I don't know, son. Mr. Dawson said something about other worlds. I—I guess we're on one of them."

There was a blank spot in all their memories. They had seemed to sleep. How long they slept, they could not even guess. It had been long enough for a surgical incision to heal completely. On earth, that sometimes took weeks, or even longer.

"Wonder what happened to the rest of—of us," Dawson muttered, frowning. "We know that at least forty people disappeared. Did you see anyone else?" he asked Jack.

"No. I went in two other rooms, but they were both empty."

"We'll look for the others then," Dawson said. "They should be here." They began a search. And began to find what and whom they sought: frightened, wondering, awed men and women. The erstwhile hospital patients were wandering along corridors, peering from windows, peeping out at the spectacular city. Twenty-eight of them were found. But not Karmak. Nor again Mary Nolan.

Dawson's face grew grim. Then Jack Rutledge glancing out a window, called, "There's somebody down below us here, Mr. Dawson. And it looks like a girl."

Dawson took one look and his heart leaped. In spite of the girl's abbreviated costume, there was no mistaking her. It was Mary Nolan!

THE girl walked out along a ramp and was looking down at the city. Dawson could see the rapt expression on her face. She had been blind; but now she could see. And she stared in ecstatic rapture at the city about her, drinking in its beauty through eyes to which perfect vision had been restored.

His heart pounding, Dawson opened the window and leaned out to call to her. But the words fairly froze on his lips. With a horrified gasp he stared, thunderstruck.

A round, fat-bellied ship was arrowing down out of the sky. Coming at tremendous speed, it was diving straight at the unsuspecting girl!

"Look out!" Dawson shouted. "Look out, Mary Nolan!"

His voice startled the girl. She glanced upward instinctively. She saw Dawson at the window—and at the same instant the roar of the diving ship rose to a tornadic crescendo.

Like a bolt of lightning it hurtled out of the sky, driving in a mad fury of speed straight toward the helpless girl. It was the same ship Dawson had glimpsed before. Lingering over the city, screaming down the skylanes for its human victim.

Mary Nolan saw it coming, cried out and turned to run. Too late—the ship was already there.

Thirty feet below the window where Dawson stood, the ramp began. It was a dangerous drop. If he missed the ramp, he would fall for hundreds of feet to the ground below—

He jumped, hit limber as a rag, rolled over and over, scrambled to his feet in time to hear the girl's screams.

The ship had rocketed now to a blasting stop. No shots were fired at Mary Nolan. Instead, creatures leaped to the ramp and seized her as she tried to run. She struck at them widly, kicked, scratched, but as Dawson raced toward her, one of the attackers smashed her in the face, a cruel knockout blow. As she collapsed another creature grabbed her, swung her over his shoulder and leaped into the ship. The port was slammed shut. Motors howling, the vessel leaped upward, carrying the girl

with it.

Mary Nolan had been kidnaped! And by the most repulsive of creatures! They looked a lot like overgrown monkeys, with tails, pointed ears and furry bodies. The second he saw them, Dawson's gorge rose within him.

Helpless, he stood there cursing, shaking his fist at them, while the ship sped away.

Then—"Dawson!" Rutledge yelled from the window. "Look out! There's another one!"

THAT very second it was diving down toward him, coming so fast that Dawson didn't have a chance to escape, even if he had wanted to. For he didn't attempt to run. Let them capture him, too! Then he might have a chance to rescue Mary Nolan. Let them take him inside the ship! If he couldn't whip twice his weight in those monkey-like creatures, he'd know the reason why.

Air screamed as the vessel braked to a halt beside him. Dawson dropped to a half crouch, the weight on the balls of his feet. The port door swung open.

But nothing leaped out at him!

Then Dawson saw that this ship was built on a different design. It was long and slender, like a torpedo. Sitting at the pilot's seat was—Karmak!

"Get in," said Karmak. "Quickly."

Surprise held Dawson motionless. He had expected more monkey-creatures to swarm from this ship. Instead it was piloted by a ghost, a phantom, an illusion. By Karmak himself!

"I'm real in *this* world," Karmak imperturbably explained. "In your world I was a phantom, but here I'm an actual entity. And if you want to save Mary Nolan, you had better enter this ship. There is no time to be lost.

Dawson leaped into the vessel. Karmak sent it screaming upward in mad acceleration. His passenger stifled the questions he wanted to ask, as the ghost-being motioned him toward a padded seat.

"In the world from which you came," Karmak said, "you would call that device in front of you a gun. All you have to do is aim it and press the button."

It looked a little like a machine gun. Dawson squinted through the sights.

"But I can't shoot without taking a chance of hitting Mary!" he protested.

"That's true," Karmak agreed. "I'll bring us up even with them. A shot into the rear of their ship will cripple their motors."

"But they'll crash!"

"No. Their anti-gravitors are located in the nose of the ship. The machine will float gently down without danger if you stop its motors."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Dawson gritted.

Covertly he studied this enigmatic stranger, trying to fathom the mystery that lay behind him. A phantom in "your" world but real "here"! What incredible secret lay behind those words?

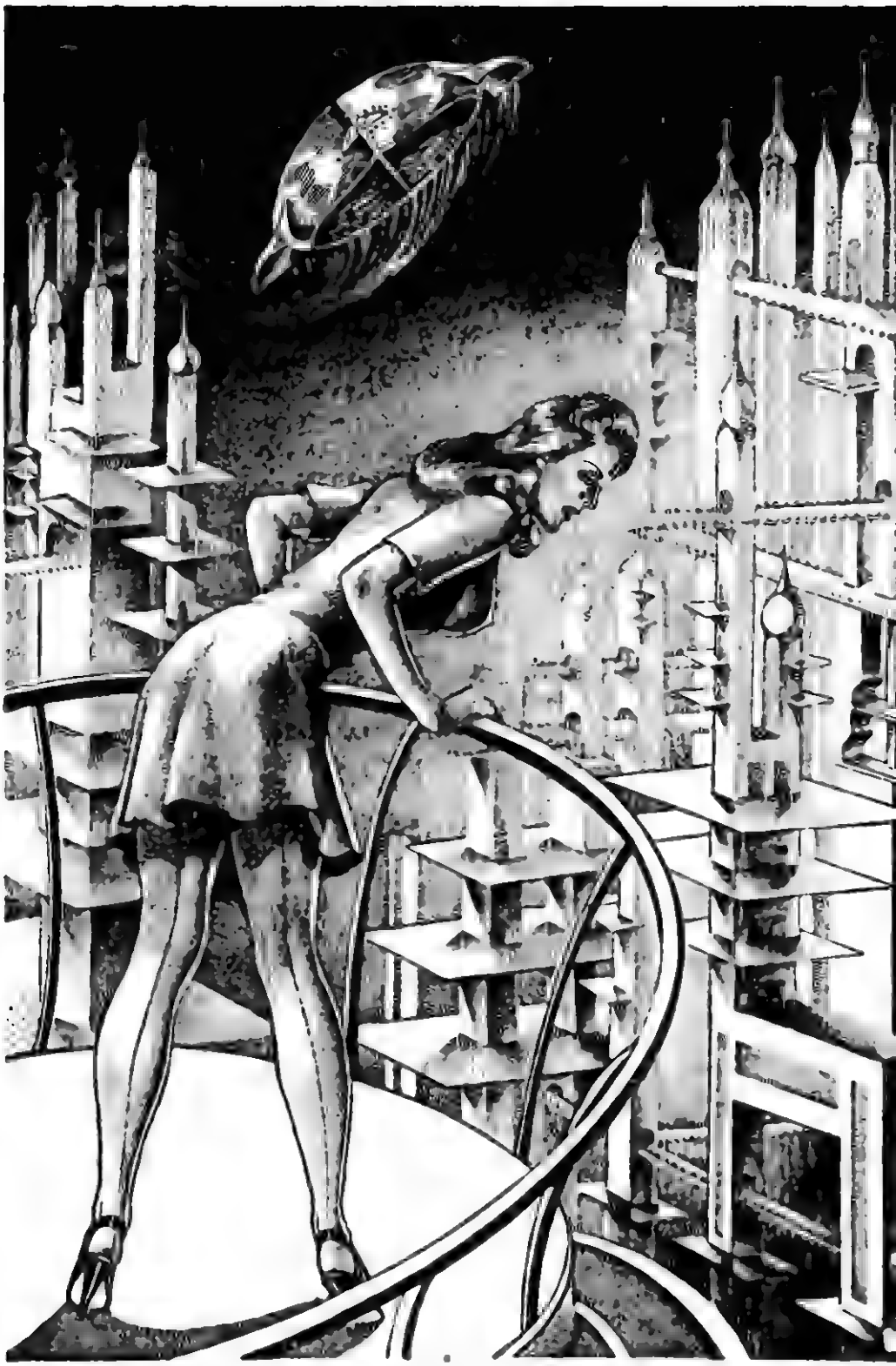
They were rapidly overhauling the fleeing ship then, when a spurt of flame flashed outward.

"They're shooting at us!" Dawson shouted.

Karmak's answer was to shove the power bar forward another notch. He showed no trace of emotion, no sign that he realized their danger.

"Aim!" he said abruptly. He had brought their vessel even with the fleeing ship.

DAWSON lined up the sights. He squeezed the trigger, then groaned. The bright spurt of flame that lanced from the gun missed the other vessel. Before he could aim again, Dawson felt his own ship swerve under him. It swept



Below her was an incredible city like no city on earth

out and away in a great curving arc.

"What did you do that for?" he blazed. "Now they may get away before we can get into position again."

"In this war," Karmak impersonally replied, "you're usually allowed only one shot. If you miss that one shot, you don't often get another one. Well, you missed."

"What the hell is this! We can try again," Dawson protested angrily.

"No," Karmak replied steadily. "There's nothing we can do now. They've gotten away. See." He pointed.

Looming in the distance was a gigantic pile of masonry. Glinting brilliantly, the sun reflected back the bright gleam of metal. It looked to be a huge fortress, as harsh and utilitarian as the city they had left was beautiful. A thin web, like a gauze curtain, sparkled in the air around it.

"It *is* a fortress," Karmak said, his explantion following so closely on what Dawson was thinking that he knew the other was reading his mind again. "The fortress of the Tolzans. And that web, which looks so thin, is an impenetrable ion screen. And there, rising from the fortress, is the reason we cannot go farther."

Dawson saw them—black dots rising upward like hornets.

"We may escape," said Karmak calmly. "We may not. The odds are about even."

He shoved the power bar forward to the last notch and the motors howled as the ship headed home.

"But they've got her!" Dawson cried. "We've got to rescue her. We can't leave her there, a prisoner of those—those things!"

"We have no other choice. If we attempt to rescue her, we will die ourselves."

"Then we'll die!" said Dawson savagely.

"No," said Karmak flatly. "Not you. We need you. We will not permit one of you to die if we can help it."

"But you're letting *her* die!"

"Not yet. It may be that the Master can rescue her."

"The Master?" Dawson demanded.

Uneasily he remembered he had heard Mary Nolan say, while she talked with a phantom in her hospital room:

"The Master needs me? But why does he need me?"

Karmak offered no answer. He drove the ship so furiously that the throbbing motors roared in protest. Behind them the black ships of the Tolzans trailed relentlessly. As they neared the city, torpedo ships rose up to meet the invaders and the black ships drew reluctantly away.

Karmak set the vessel down on a roof landing. As Dawson stepped out, Dr. Rutledge came from below to greet him.

THE first thing Dawson saw was the weapon that had been erected on the roof. It pointed a blunt barrel at the sky. Two men who much resembled Karmak served as its crew. Looking over the city, Dawson saw many of the weapons on the roofs. And high overhead a fleet of torpedo ships swung in a great circle.

"They began setting those guns up as soon as you were gone," Rutledge explained. "I gathered they were expecting something to follow you back and were arranging a warm reception."

Dawson frowned. Who had ordered the defenders out? Where had they come from? The city had looked deserted. Now an air armada swarmed over it.

Dawson turned sharply to Karmak, who was still seated at the controls.

"There are some things," he said bluntly, "that I want to know. Where

is this city? Who are you? Who is the Master? What's the reason back of all this?"

Karmak started to answer, then looked appraisingly at Dawson. Something made him change his mind.

"The Master needs me," was all he would say. "I must go to him." He started to close the port door.

"No you don't," Dawson said sharply. He wedged himself into the port. "Before you get away from here, you're going to talk."

Karmak showed no sign of annoyance. His perfect features were utterly calm. For a moment he studied the grim man who faced him. Then he reached forward and simply shoved Dawson out of the way. He had taken the ship into the sky before Dawson could scramble to his feet.

"They don't want to talk," Rutledge shrugged. "I tried."

Dawson got to his feet. "Somebody is going to talk," he said dangerously. He walked across the roof to the gun crew.

One look at them and all his baffled truculence vanished. What he saw was utterly incredible.

If the two men at the gun had been identical twins, they could not have been more alike. More incredible still, they both looked exactly like Karmak. Nose, eyes, features, haughty impersonal stare, height, coloring—everything was exactly the same, to an incredible degree.

"They look as though they all came out of the same mold," said Rutledge uneasily.

"What's your name?" asked Dawson as he approached the nearest man.

"Karmak," the reply came. Dawson went pale.

"And yours?" he rasped at the second one.

"Karmak."

DAWSON expelled his breath in a panting sigh. This was too much. He felt a little silly, as if somebody was making fun of him. But there was nothing funny about those two stern, impersonal creatures who stood there, each assuring him that his name was Karmak. There was something terrible about it, something frightening. It became more terrible and more frightening when he asked them what they were.

"We," they both chimed, "are an experiment that failed."

Dawson drew away from them. Long habit enabled him to control his nerves. But still he didn't want to be too close to them. In spite of the fact that a creature just like them had tried to help him rescue Mary Nolan, he could not be certain that they were friendly.

When he resumed his questions, they shut up like clams. During the time he had been talking to them, he noticed that they became sluggish in their movements. The color drained out of their faces, their eyes seemed to get heavy. It was with difficulty that they stood erect.

"Go away," they said. "Go away."

"Is something wrong?" Dawson demanded. "Are you sick?"

"No," the sluggish answer came. "The Master rests . . ."

They seemed to think that was sufficient explanation. When Dawson asked further questions, they both sat down, yawned, rolled over on their backs—and went to sleep. Swear and prod, Dawson couldn't awaken them.

"They're fine soldiers," Rutledge grimaced. "Sleeping at their posts! They could be shot for this."

"Come away and leave them alone," Dawson replied. "There's something distinctly wrong about them."

And then his eyes grew round and bewildered. Across the roof tops, as far as he could see, gun crews were sleeping

at their weapons.

CHAPTER IV

What the Stars Told

"I'VE been thinking," Roy Glenn said, as he glanced upward at the reddish sun, "I'm an amateur astronomer. You understand—it was a hobby."

"When night comes, perhaps we can tell where we are by the stars. What I mean is, if we can find any of the constellations we know, we can be pretty certain we're still in the solar system."

"What makes you think we might be in the solar system?" Rutledge questioned the man, one of the twenty-eight patients rediscovered.

"I don't have any reason for thinking that we are," Glenn answered. "But we might be. We might be on one of the planets—Mars, or possibly Venus. Although this world shouldn't be Venus, because there aren't many clouds in the sky and Venus is covered by clouds all the time.

"Maybe Karmak had a space ship hidden somewhere. Maybe he put us in that ship and brought us to Mars. Of course, I know space ships haven't been invented on earth yet, but they might have been invented in the world that Karmak came from. And maybe that's what's happened to us," he finished lamely.

Rutledge glanced at Dawson. "What do you think? Is Glenn possibly on the right track?"

"I'd only be guessing, too," Dawson answered. He looked at the sun, estimating its height above the horizon. "We'll know in an hour. Meanwhile, did anything happen while I was gone?"

They had found more humans—fifty-three in all, with Mary Nolan making fifty-four—but Dawson had already been told about that, and Rutledge didn't repeat it.

"We went exploring," Rutledge explained. "I found their operating room." His voice quickened. "It was the most marvelous place I ever saw! They've got equipment that will make your head swim. And X-rays! You possibly know that on earth there is no known device that will *focus* X-rays. But these people can do it!

"You can see everything that's happening inside the body, every bit of tissue, every bone, the individual cells even, if you want to focus that close. And they have other instruments that I can't begin to describe.

"But I know this much. These people are ten thousand—no a hundred thousand years ahead of us!"

"We've already surmised that much," Dawson nodded. "Did you find the surgeons who used this marvelous operating room?"

"No," said Rutledge sadly. "We didn't find anybody."

The physician sounded rather forlorn. Indeed, there was a forlorn air about the whole group. They conversed softly, in awed whispers, and as the sun went down, they began to watch the sky expectantly.

What they would see in the heavens meant a lot to them. It would tell them where they were, possibly tell them where home was—the earth from which they had been taken to serve as cogs in the machinery of some secret, bewildering scheme.

THE sun was gone now. The whole group gathered around Roy Glenn, began to scan the heavens with him. One by one the stars came out. And again the group sighed with inner depression.

For there was no known constellation in the whole sky. The Big Dipper was not there, nor Orion, nor the Pleiades,

nor the Southern Cross, nor any constellation even remotely familiar. Nor, in fact, a single recognizable star.

"We're out of our universe," Glenn muttered. "I've never seen any of these stars before, nor any of the constellations. We're not even in the solar system. We've been warped completely out of our own solar system."

There was pained silence. Men looked at each other and then away, trying not to say the things that were in their hearts. Their uneasiness grew, until Jack Rutledge, in a small voice, said:

"Talk about Robinson Crusoe! He had nothing on us."

His voice broke the tension. Someone laughed, and another chuckle answered the first.

And then, across the roof, a foot scraped heavily. The Karmaks had risen. Completely alert again, they were standing at attention beside their weapons. Suddenly one of the earth group cried out.

A ship was coming through the starlight, a slim torpedo craft. It planed to a halt on the roof. Another Karmak emerged from it and came toward the expectant group.

"Food has been prepared and is waiting for you down below," he announced. "Unfortunately it is synthetic, but you will find it palatable, I think. Also your quarters are being made ready."

They had forgotten about food in their alternate moods of excitement and depression. Now Jack Rutledge laughed.

"Lead me to it! I could eat a cow and bawl for the calf."

Dawson started automatically to follow the others, but Karmak spoke to him.

"I have a message for you."

"Who from? What is it?"

"From the Master. He says that tonight, after you have eaten, you and I may attempt to rescue the girl. He will assist us."

Dawson's heart leaped. "In that case," he exclaimed, "I can get along without eating!"

A chance to rescue Mary Nolan! It was the thing that had tortured his thoughts for hours. His purpose in questioning the gun crew had been to find out if he could obtain a ship. Now the opportunity had come.

Karmak, moving rapidly, led him to the vessel.

"Your people seem to have come out of their trance," Dawson observed.

"Yes," came the unemotional answer. "The Master no longer rests. In consequence we are busy."

"Then you loaf when he isn't on the job?"

"No," Karmak dissented. "It's not like that. When he rests, we rest too."

It was an enigma that the fellow apparently had no intention of clarifying. When Dawson asked further about the Master, he got no answer at all.

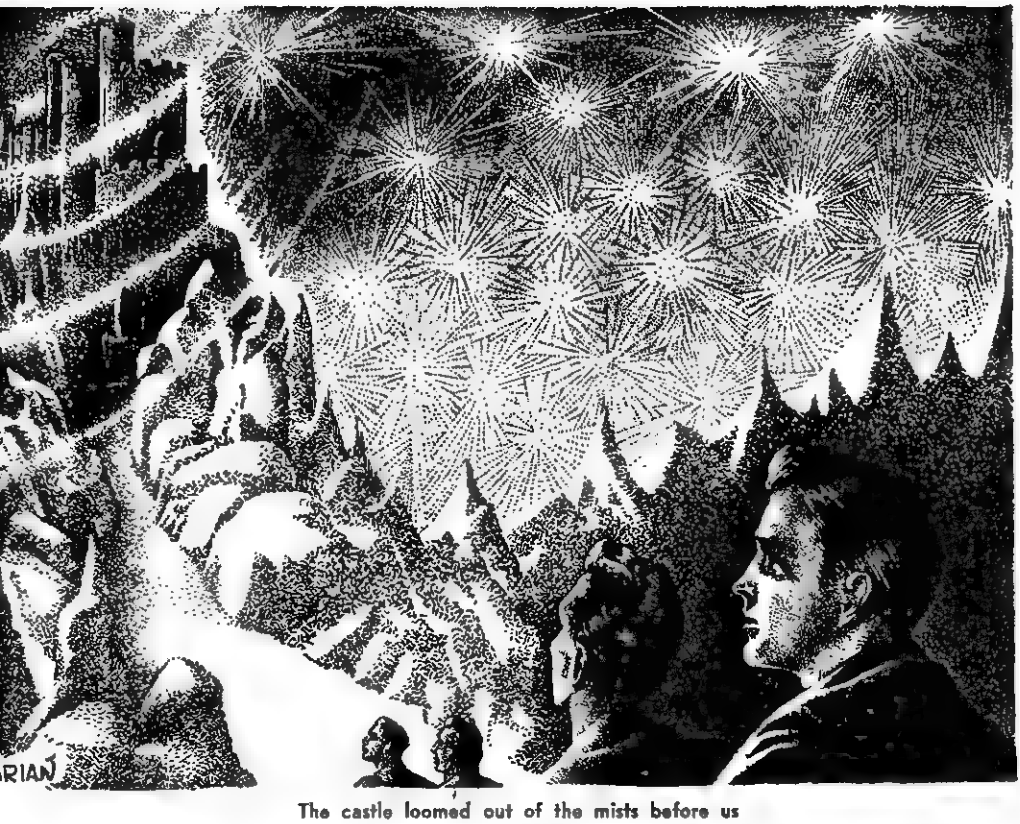
INSIDE the ship four of Karmak's duplicate companions waited, each looking exactly like the other.

"Tell me which is which," Dawson questioned. "I can't tell you apart."

"If it will help your peace of mind, I am the first one you met, the one who appeared to you in your world. Now, no more questions. If we are to defeat the Tolzans, the task will require our entire attention."

"In that case," Dawson replied, "I'll subside."

He did keep silent. But the questions kept turning over in his mind. The ship slid into the air, sped whistling to the southward. The fortress of the Tolzans came into sight presently, its ion screen a luminous blur. It was a huge thing, miles in circumference.



The castle loomed out of the mists before us

"Getting into that place is going to take some doing," Dawson told himself.

He was ready to take the chance, although he guessed there must be thousands of the monkey-men inside the huge pile of metal and stone. He wondered how Karmak, or his hidden, enigmatic Master, had planned for them to obtain entrance; or, once they got inside, to accomplish their mission. The ion screen was supposed to be impenetrable.

"We will stop here," Karmak said. He lowered the ship into a dark ravine, carefully jockeying it out of sight among the trees, landed. He opened the port door then and stepped out, his four comapnions following like wooden soldiers on parade.

"Are we going to tackle that place on foot?" Dawson demanded.

"There is no other way. Our ship cannot pierce the screen," Karmak answered. "There is a gate near here. We will enter through that."

He slipped away into the star-broken darkness, his men following closely. Dawson joined them, thinking that perhaps Karmak knew of a secret passage.

Above them the fortress rose into the night, a black mountain surrounded by nebulous witchfire.

They came to the end of the ravine, emerged from it. The gate was readily visible ahead of them. There was nothing secret about it. It stood right out in the open, the ion screen coming down and touching it.

And it was guarded. At least twenty of the monkey-creatures lounged in front. Dawson's fingers closed over Karmak's shoulder, his fingers biting into the flesh.

"Is *that* the entrance we're supposed to use?"

"That is correct."

"But it's in the open and it's guarded!"

There was not a scrap of cover within a hundred yards. The starlight and the glow from the ion screen showed up every detail.

"Yes, it's in the open and it's guarded. But we're going to pass *through* it. And if you value the life of Mary Nolan, do exactly as we do, and under no circumstances utter a sound."

IT was impossible to believe that Karmak was lying. Yet Dawson remembered that something was not right about this people. Were they really allies of the monkey-men? His knuckles hardened as his hands balled into fists. The skin drew tight over his cheeks.

But there was nothing he could do except follow the Karmak. And perhaps they were going to rush the gate. A blast of devastating fire and then a rush? It might work. Something had to work, Dawson thought grimly.

Karmak did not order his men to fire. He did nothing, except stand still. Dawson caught the fleeting impression that the fellow was conversing with some unseen presence. Or perhaps he was praying. His eyes were partly closed and his impersonal face was even more immobile than usual.

Karmak opened his eyes. A frown of concentration creased his forehead. He took Dawson by the hand and walked into the open, straight toward the gate, his four companions marching behind.

They were plainly visible now. There was no cover of any kind. Yet Karmak was marching straight toward that guarded gate, making no effort to hide.

"But—"

"Silence!" Karmak hissed venomously.

Dawson bit his lips. They marched forward, directly toward the gate. The guards glanced at them, then looked away, seemingly without seeing. Karmak pushed the barrier aside and the little party passed through the gate, through the ion screen, and into a corridor.

Dawson was sweating profusely. Karmak had got them past the entrance after all. He was not a traitor.

It was not until then that Dawson realized that something invisible, unseen, unheard guarded them, concealed them somehow. Some tremendous power was laid over them. They were protected by a hand whose power was all the greater because of its invisibility.

There are two kinds of illusions, Dawson knew. In the first, the spectator sees an object or a person that *is not* present. Karmak, or his hidden Master, was using the second type, in which the spectator does not see an object or a person that *is* present.

It was invisibility, worked through mental control. The minds of the guards had been seized by a stronger brain than theirs, and the hypnotic effect of that higher mind kept them from seeing the intruders pass.

Sweat ran down Dawson's face. A coldness chilled his body. For the first time in his life he knew the meaning of real fear, a sick chill that settled at the pit of his stomach. He was glad that those secret surgeons had repaired his heart. Otherwise it would never have stood the strain.

The tension was getting to Karmak, too, for his face had lost its immobility. It was lined now with wrinkles, and his lips were pulled back over his teeth in a fighting snarl. He was as tense as a scared cat and his actions were timed to split seconds, his eyes darting everywhere. But he never hesitated

on a turn, never faltered.

They encountered monkey men, at first only a few, then more and more, and as the creatures increased in number, the lines of tension dug deeper into Karmak's face.

These Tolzans began to look doubtful, to glance around, to call nervously to each other, as if they were beginning to suspect the presence of intruders in their fortress, as they guessed that something was wrong. They didn't *know* what was wrong, but occasionally Dawson caught startled glances from the monkey creatures, as if they *almost* saw him.

Then Karmak, hurrying through the maze of corridors like a hound hot on the scent of prey, stopped suddenly and opened a door.

One glance inside, and Dawson's heart rose into his throat. Mary Nolan was tied to a chair inside that room—with four Tolzans as guards.

CHAPTER V

Inside the Fortress

WHEN the door opened, an instant elapsed before Karmak could reach the minds of the Tolzans inside the room. His brows knotted with the intensity of his concentration. An incredible wave of mental force seemed to flow from him. The monkey-men looked up, blinked—and froze into immobility.

"Inside, quickly!" Karmak hissed. They leaped inside, closed the door.

Karmak, at the moment of entering, had extended his control to Mary Nolan so that no startled look from her would betray them. Now he released her mind, and she saw them.

"George Dawson!" she whispered. She was too stunned to move. In that terrible prison, in the heart of that vast stronghold, the girl had thought herself beyond help. "Are—are you real? Or am I—seeing things that aren't there?"

"I'm real, all right," Dawson answered, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. He started to explain what had happened, but the sudden sound of another voice brought home the terrible danger that was all around them.

It was a Tolzan who spoke, a monkey-man!

"I—I am positive the door opened a second ago," he was saying.

"Yes," said another. "It did open. And it closed. But no one came in."

"There is," a third creature said, "a center of force here in the room. It is trying to control our minds."

Karmak's power was weakening. These four Tolzans were of a higher type than the ones in the corridors. They looked more intelligent and their uniform decorations indicated they were of higher rank in the Tolzan scheme of things.

"Seize their minds!" Dawson whispered excitedly to Karmak.

Sweat was pouring from Karmak's face as he attempted to maintain his control over the four guards. Tried and began to fail!

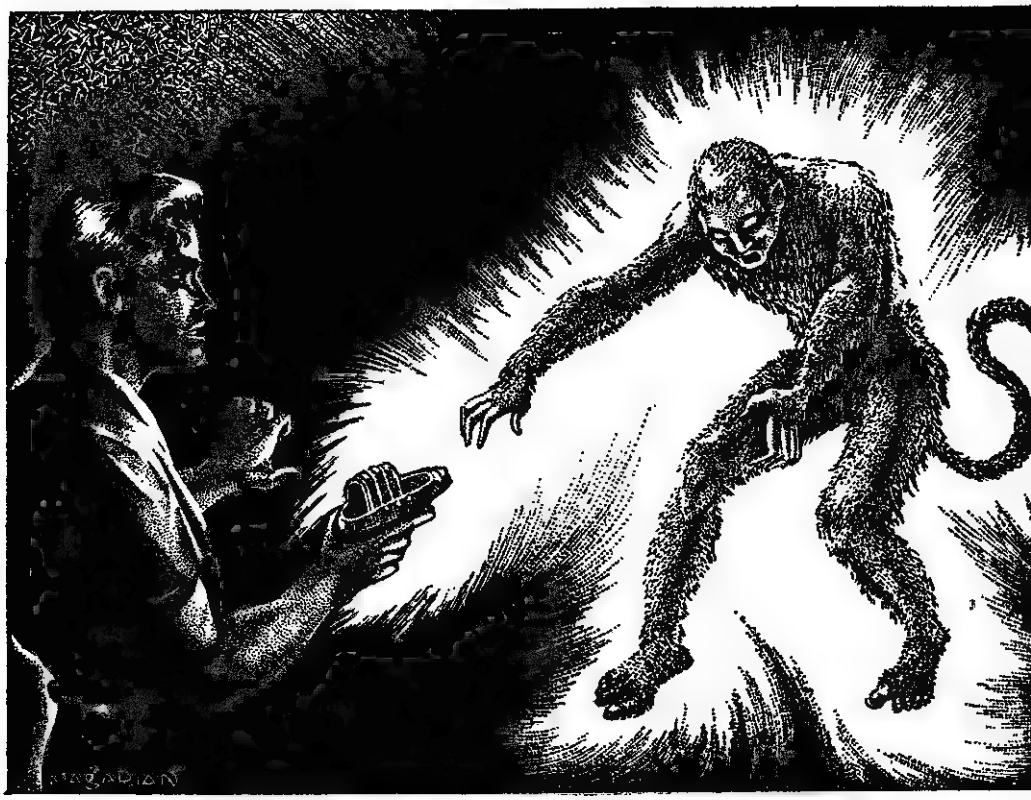
"I can't," he wailed. "I can't—"

"But you must! We can't get out of here if you don't. Bring your hypnotic powers into focus!"

"I can't" Karmak whispered again; and when Dawson shook him, he began to tremble. "You don't understand—I have no power. It is the strength of the Master flowing through me that controls other minds. And the Master weakens—he must rest—"

"He can't weaken! We'll never get out without his help!" Dawson pleaded.

"He is weakening. He must—must rest. He is—ill. He can't—do anything more."



Dawson brought his gun up, and the Tolzan's body glowed silently and he died

Until then Dawson had not realized that the tremendous power Karmak wielded came from another source, that Karmak was in reality only a remote-control relay station. The fellow was fighting desperately to maintain the upper hand, but it was patently a losing fight.

"I see them!" one of the Tolzans shouted suddenly. "Karmaks! Right here in this room! Destroy them!"

His hand dived toward a belt gun.

DAWSON took one step. The Tolzan's hand was moving like lightning toward his weapon. Dawson brought up his fist. It had every ounce of his strength behind it. Hard knuckles connected like a mallet with the Tolzan's chin. A numbness sped down Dawson's arm. But the chin of the monkey-man jerked backward. The sharp *crack!* of a breaking vertebra was loud in the room. The Tolzan guard turned a double somersault backward, his neck broken. He was dead before he hit the floor.

But there were three others. Their guns were out now and coming up. Dawson dived. He struck the nearest monkey-creature just above his furry knees, and the smash of his tackle carried another Tolzan with him. What the third guard was doing, Dawson did not know. He had his hands full with the two he had tackled.

He thought he had an armful of snakes, from the agility with which the creatures moved. Neither could fire at him for fear of hitting the other, but they could claw and scratch, and their teeth were viciously sharp.

Dawson brought up a knee. It struck one of the Tolzans in the stomach. Whooshing air, he subsided. Dawson grabbed the other, only to hear a sodden thump and feel the creature go limp in his hands. He looked up and saw Mary Nolan bending over him, a gun in her hand raised and ready to strike again.

Good girl, Dawson thought. He looked for the fourth Tolzan, saw him lying on the floor near the door. His body was still jerking.

"I shot him with a gun one of your friends dropped," Mary said. "But I couldn't shoot the two you were fighting with. You were in the way all the time!"

"Very good," Karmak spoke unexpectedly, his voice faint with weakness. "Excellent job. Proves the Master was right. Must rest—now."

He was already lying on the floor. As he uttered the last words, his eyes closed. He and his four companions calmly went to sleep.

"Are they hurt?" Mary asked, concerned.

"Hell, no!" Dawson snorted. "But something is wrong with them, and this going-to-sleep business is part of it."

He tried to arouse them, but they lay like the dead.

"I hate to tell you this," Mary told him, "but one of those monkey-creatures may come in any minute. They've been running in and out of here ever since they brought me in."

Dawson picked up the hand gun that one of the Karmaks had dropped.

"I pity any monkey-man that comes through that door!"

He pulled Karmak and his four companions to one side, so that they would not be the first object seen by anyone who entered. There was no exit from the room, other than the one door.

"We've just got to wait until they decide they've rested long enough," he said. "All we can do is keep our chins up."

"You don't have to tell me to keep my chin up!" Mary flared.

"Sorry," Dawson answered. The girl was tense and still somewhat unnerved. He tried to grin, and her smile flashed a bit wanly in reply. "Mary, if we ever get out of this mess, there's something I want to tell you. Remind me of it, will you, if I should forget."

Mary blushed furiously. "I will not!" she snapped. "If you can't remember it yourself, it's not my place to remind you—*Watch* out!"

The door opened. A furry Tolzan stood there, gaping at them.

DAWSON shot him. The gun did not discharge a bullet. But whatever the missile was, it was deadly efficient. A blazing electrical discharge raced over the Tolzan's body. Dawson caught him as he fell, jerked him inside, started to slam the door, when he saw another monkey-face staring round-eyed at him in the corridor outside. He fired again, but the face had vanished.

A warning yell echoed down the corridor. It was immediately answered.

Dawson bolted the door. "We're in for it. They know we're here now."

He could hear the Tolzans gathering outside, their shrill voices chattering angrily. He collected all the guns, including those of the unconscious Karmaks. Setting them within easy reach, he stretched himself on the floor. Mary picked up one of the guns and lay down beside him.

"If you think you've got a monopoly on these things," she announced, "you're badly mistaken."

"Okay, pal," Dawson grinned tightly. "They'll get us in time—but before they do, they'll think hell is a comfortable place compared to this!"

A heavy blow against the door

drowned the girl's reply. The barrier was metal, and it clanged like a gong when struck. Another blow followed the first, and then another and yet another. Even metal couldn't withstand that pounding for long. It didn't. A panel was knocked loose and fell out.

Greenish flame licked through the opening at them. They fired together. A yell sounded outside.

"Singed one," Dawson diagnosed the yell. "Ah!" He fired again. Stabbing fingers of flame reached out at them, but the Tolzans could not shoot accurately without appearing before the hole. When they did that, they died—noisily.

"Only one thing—" Dawson began.

"What's that?" Mary demanded.

He didn't answer. There was no point in wondering how long it would be before the Tolzans thought of using bombs.

A second later they did think of it. A bomb come flashing through the opening in the door, fell sputtering at the far side of the room. Dawson leaped toward it. He knew he didn't have a chance to get to it in time, but at least he could make the attempt. As he scrambled toward it a lithe body leaped ahead of him, seized the bomb and flung it back out the door.

The thunder of the explosion roared in the corridor, mingled with the screams of the monkey-men.

"Thanks," said Dawson, mopping his brow. "So you woke up. You people go to sleep and wake up at the damnedest times!"

But Karmak, who had caught the bomb, scarely heard him. He took in the whole situation at a glance. Instantly reacting, he turned to his four companions, who had also awakened, and barked at them.

"Two of you go out and clear the way for us."

TWO Karmaks promptly grabbed their guns from the floor. They didn't hesitate, didn't seem to stop to think. They had been given an order and they prepared to obey it.

"But they'll be killed," Dawson protested.

"Certainly they will be killed," Karmak admitted. "We will go out right behind them. Give your weapons back to my other two men. They can use them better than you can."

His manner was so forceful, his decisions so rapid, that Dawson didn't have a chance to object.

The two Karmaks leaped through the door. Their weapons up, fire flashing from them, they charged out—and died.

As they fell, Karmak stepped forward. He hesitated a moment before he took the next move, and his eyes closed as if in silent prayer. Then his face wrinkled into that terrible frown of concentration. He stepped out just as the first two expired. Gun flashes had now died away, even those from the Tolzans.

"Come on!" Karmak hissed. "We've got to move fast."

The rest followed him with beating hearts.

Outside the Tolzans stood around like so many statues, staring stupidly at—nothing.

"What's happened to them?" Mary whispered, awestruck.

"I think," said Dawson, "that the Master has finished resting and has got on the job again—with more power than ever."

Karmak didn't say a word. But the lines in his face deepened as the terrible power flowed through him. He walked forward, moving like an automaton. The rest followed. As though hypnotized, the Tolzans opened a lane and let them pass.

Then—they were out of the fortress, beyond the guards, past the gate. Safe. *Safe!*

A screech came from behind them. Turning, they saw hordes of the furry monkey-men pouring out of the fortress, coming after them like avenging furies.

"I can't control them any longer," Karmak whispered. "We're too far away. And my power is failing. The Master must rest again."

He faced Dawson. "You take Mary Nolan to the ship. You have watched me operate it and you know how to handle the controls. Go, now."

Dawson did not move. "What about you?" he said bluntly.

"We will hold the Tolzans while you escape." Karmak said the words casually, as if they were of no importance.

"You mean that while we run, you die," Dawson corrected.

"Yes," Karmak admitted calmly. "We will die. But that does not matter. All that matters is that you and Mary escape."

BEHIND them the yells of the Tolzans sounded clearly.

"No sale," Dawson snapped. "There are some things I don't understand about you, pal. But if you think I'm going to run off to safety while you stay here and die, you're barking up the wrong tree. We all escape together—or we all die together. Right?" He glanced at Mary.

"Right," she answered simply.

"But you *must* go," Karmak was pleading. "It is the will of the Master. And you don't understand—about us."

"To hell with the Master!" Dawson stormed. " I understand bravery when I see it. You sent two of your fellows to their death in that corridor, before I knew what you were doing. But you're not going to send two more, yourself included, just so we can escape! No dice, my friend. I like to play games, but not that kind."

Karmak's face writhed with pleading but he saw that Dawson was adamant. He seemed then to turn his mind inward. Again he looked as though he were praying. A wordless conference seem to take place. Then he looked up. There was the ghost of a smile on his face.

"The Master says that your courage gives him strength to fight off his exhaustion and aid us a while longer."

"You mean he has seen everything that has gone on!" Dawson exclaimed.

"Of course. All that I have seen, he has seen. Every move I have made, he has directed. Now we must go. Not a moment is to be lost."

CHAPTER VI

The Master

THEY reached the ship, boarded it and took off. And just in time; for, from the huge Tolzan fortress behind them, a whole host of pursuers was rising.

"They're after us hot and heavy," Dawson growled.

"I think they're after more than us," stated Mary. "From what they said, I think they are planning a large-scale attack. They are ready to launch it at any moment, and our escape has been the signal that set them off."

"The Big Push, eh? What else did you find out?"

"Well, there have been sporadic outbursts of fighting for years, possibly for centuries, between the Tolzans and something that lives in the city where we were taken. Seemingly neither side has been able to gain a victory, but the Tolzans have learned recently that their enemy was planning some new surprise

against them.

"I don't know exactly what that surprise was, but I think we're part of it. They had been watching the city closely, and when they saw me walking on the ramp, they decided to capture me, so they could ask questions."

"What kind of questions?" Dawson wanted to know.

"Who I was, what I was, where I came from. I tried to tell them and they became very excited. They called in their physicians and made a careful physical examination," Mary blushed a little there—"and then they called me a primitive form, 'Unquestionably primitive.' And that really excited them.

" 'So that is what he has done!' they said, to each other. 'When his Karmaks failed, he sought out a primitive form to bring against us.' Do you have any idea what they meant, George?"

"I can guess. It's obvious that the Tolzans think we are to be used against them."

Dawson glanced out at the fleeting landscape, and then back at the oncoming pursuit. It was gaining on them, the dark ships drawing closer, but Dawson didn't mention it. Karmak, at the controls, had the power bar forward as far as it would go.

In the end they were saved, not by their own efforts but by three torpedo ships that came whistling to meet them. Three ships from the city, vessels that Karmak and his companions used. They came up just as fingers of flame were beginning to reach forward from the Tolzan ships.

The rescuers didn't hesitate, didn't attempt to set up a rearguard action. Spreading like a fan, the three ships drove headlong at the mass of Tolzan hornets. The night grew lurid with flame. A knot of ships milled in the sky, twisting, darting, turning. There was never any doubt about the outcome. The only doubt was how long it would be before three coffins of burning metal dropped to the ground.

It might have been a minute, or two minutes. It was not long. The Dawson group had gained the necessary distance to make it to safety. The price had been the smashing of three ships and the death of their crews.

DAWSON prodded Karmak in the shoulder. "Did your Master send those ships out to aid us?"

"Yes," Karmak replied. He seemed weary.

"He sent them out to die so we might escape?"

"Yes. To the Master, your lives are precious."

"I gather that much," Dawson answered bitterly. His face clouded with anger. He was awed. And scared, too. Not of dying, but of that fearsome purpose that carelessly sacrificed lives that others might live.

"I want to see this Master," he ground out.

"That," Karmak answered, "is where I take you now, you and your fellows—to see the Master."

The ship slid to a halt on a roof landing. As they stepped out, Dawson looked to the south. The night was alive with lights—the oncoming Tolzan horde. Flashing two-man pursuit ships, heavy cruisers, and bringing up the rear—the lumbering hulks of battleships; great monsters pushing their way through the skylanes.

Not ten ships, not twenty ships. Hundreds of ships!

"It's the Big Push, all right," Dawson muttered. "They're coming with all they've got—and it looks like they've got plenty, and then some to spare."

By the starlight he could see Kar-

maks on the roofs. They crouched at their guns, waiting. And from three different hangars steady lines of ships were rising. Fighter after fighter took to the air. As he saw them going gallantly forth, Dawson knew a pain in his heart that was not physical.

"It will be a battle all right," he muttered. "It will be a battle."

Karmak was at his side now. "Come below. The Master waits," he was urging.

Obediently the group followed him. He led them below, where the other earth people waited. Rutledge's voice boomed once, at Dawson.

"I see you brought her back," he said. "Good." He said nothing more. He and all the others knew a battle was coming. Looking from their windows, they had seen the combatants sallying forth.

At a gesture from Karmak the entire group followed him downward. They came to the ground level and still headed down. Below the lower levels they found elevators functioning. Karmak motioned his charges to use them.

After a sharp descent huge doors swung open, revealing a vast chamber ahead of the party. It stretched away on either side, a tremendous cavern. Except for an open space in the center, it was filled, literally crammed with a bewildering array of machinery, most of which was electrical.

Switchboards and generators, the soft glow of tubes, round bulked housings that resembled cyclotrons but weren't, blank screens, apparatus that served an unguessed purpose — Dawson stared open-mouthed at the sight.

In the open space in the center was —the Master.

"APPROACH," Karmak said. He led the way, then slipped unobtrusively to one side.

Dawson looked once, a hurried glance, and then quit looking and started wondering. Around him he heard soft gasps. He felt a hand creep into his and, glancing down, saw Mary standing beside him.

"He—he isn't like the Karmaks," someone whispered.

"Nor the Tolzans," another said.

"What—what is he?"

The Master was old. That much was certain. His legs were withered, his body frail and slender, his skin as white as alabaster. He was sitting in a kind of chair that was more of a bed than it was a chair, his hands resting on the arms. Beneath his fingers, built into the arms of the chair, were row after row of buttons.

There was a beard on his chin, a white beard. And his head—looking at that head, Dawson wondered how much knowledge it might contain. For it was big. Ten times as big as the head of a normal man, and all out of proportion to the body. A special rest supported it, enabling the aged patriarch to hold it erect.

This was the Master. And he looked more dead than alive. Not until Dawson saw his eyes did he fully realize that the Master was alive. For those eyes were bright. They glittered with an unmistakable brillance.

As he watched, Dawson understood why the eyes were glittering. Tears were rolling from them.

The Master was crying.

Of all the things that had happened, this was perhaps the most incomprehensible. This frail creature sat there in his chair, and looked at them, and *cried*. Dawson felt the pangs of real sympathy. There was something heartrending about those tears; something awesome, too. It was Mary Nolan who understood that the Master did not have the strength to raise his arms. She stepped

forward and dabbed at his cheeks with a tiny handkerchief.

"Thank you," the Master said, his voice vibrant with emotion. "I—must apologize for this display, but if you knew how much it means to me to have you here, you would know why I can't help crying."

Dawson was thoroughly touched. But when he remembered that it was this same Master who had sent crews of three ships to certain doom, his sympathy hardened.

The Master read his mind. "They died willingly," he sighed. "To them it is all the same—life or death. They do not fear death because they have never been alive."

"Never been alive!" Dawson gasped.

"NO," the Master explained. "You see, they were an experiment that was unsuccessful. I could synthesize perfect bodies, but somehow I could never instill the life-force into those bodies, could never make them live. I could analyze the life-force, and the theory was correct, but somehow it would never work out. If I had had time—but the point was, I didn't have time."

"Then Karmak—and his companions—they were synthetic creatures. You created them."

"Certainly."

"But they lived, they moved, they talked and breathed. They were alive."

"I could animate them with my will. They *then* seemingly had life.When I withdrew my control, or when exhaustion forced me to rest but look!"

His eyes flicked to the left. Karmak, the imperturbable, the impersonal, lay there. He had slumped to the floor like a dead man.

"I have withdrawn my control from him," the Master said. "And he lies like that. Nor will he awaken, nor move, nor show any life at all beyond a sluggish heartbeat and a shallow breathing, until I reinvest him with my will. In a sense—

"Yes," the Master made a deprecatory gesture, "I see you were thinking about them in your world. He is indeed a robot made of flesh. I assure you it is not my wish for him to be that way. I tried every way to make them live, but everything failed. And I had plans for them too, if I could find some method to make them live.

"They were to be the race that carried on after me. As things turned out, I had no choice except to use them for another purpose. They became my hands, they did my bidding, carried out my orders. I can control each of them separately and thus accomplish many things otherwise impossible."

Dawson's mind reeled. Robots! The Karmaks were robots. Now he understood the fatal defect Karmak had mentioned. These faithful servants were not alive.

They were inanimate bits of flesh until invested by a greater, stronger will. Then, too, their rest periods. When their aged Master relaxed, they rested with him. When he became too exhausted to control them, they sank into a drugged stupor.

But what was the Master? And what was this strange world of his?

When Dawson asked that question, a sudden silence fell. All the whispering ceased, the nervous shifting of feet. Everyone looked toward the ancient figure seated in the chair.

It meant a lot, the answer to that question. It gave purpose to everything that had happened—or took away all purpose and all meaning.

"I," the Master said, "am human. I am a man. Rather, I am the far-removed descendant of the mutant which

you were expecting even in your day. I am the many times removed grandson of the superman you knew was coming. And this world—" he hesitated, and in the heavy silence someone caught his breath."

"—is Earth."

HE WAS fooling them, Dawson thought. He was playing with them, like a cat with mice. He was lying to them, had been lying to them all the time. This planet was not Earth, could not be Earth. The very stars in the heavens showed that the Master lied.

Blood rushed to Dawson's face and his mouth opened to speak angry words. But the Master, smiling a little wanly, held up his hand.

"Be not so impetuous, my son," he said. "All things come to those who wait, I believe it was once said on your Earth. Yes, the constellations you have seen in the heavens here and the stars are certainly different. But this is Earth —more than three-quarters of a million years after you left it. This is Earth in the beginning of its old age. The sun has grown red, and the constellations have shifted so you cannot recognize them.

"You, George Dawson," the Master said, "have been shifted in time, lifted across the warped loops that made up time, into the future of which"—his old eyes went from man to man—"some of you have perhaps dreamed."

It could be true. It might be true. There was a chance that this ancient being was not lying to them.

The Master went on to explain that he had worked out his time-transit method by means of a system of mathematics which had not yet been developed in the twentieth century.

This time-transference had been, too, a form of mental projection, with the active power emanating from the Master's super-brilliant mentality. Back in the year 1940, from which they had been "kidnaped", the ex-patients knew that each atom was a form of transmitting set in miniature, that thought-waves were closely allied with radio waves.

But in 1940, although for centuries man had pondered the problem of mind over matter, the connection between atomic matter and thought-wave projection had never been seriously considered. The Master, then, had sent his mind back through time.

He had, in a word, perfectly visualized scenes from history—that is, history to *him*—and thus been able to recreate any particular historical condition through thought-wave projection as applied concretely to atomic substance.

DAWSON gasped at the implications of this great accomplishment. Another aspect of the Master's doings, however, caused his brows to furrow.

"But why," he asked, "why have you taken only the dying from the Earth? Why didn't you take the living?"

The Master sighed deeply. "Because they were the only people I could work with. My power, vast as it is, has its limits, too. It is certainly not great enough to affect the living—those with a healthy life span ahead of them in which to work out their destiny.

"The healthy individual will move and walk and talk and eat, and the strength of his normal energy forges ties which bind him to the present—*his* present. This relationship is so natural, so strong that even I cannot impede it. Nor, indeed, would I be so callous as to make the attempt."

The Master's eyes were shining. "But as for those about to die—ah, that is another matter entirely! And so I took only those on the verge of death, because the dead have no future, at least in my belief. The dying have no more

work to do, no more energy to expend. And they would serve my purpose just as well. Once here, they could be cured."

As he finished speaking, the floor trembled slightly. The Master's attention was for a moment withdrawn. He seemed to be taking counsel with himself. Then he spoke again.

"If you have any further questions, ask them of me now. Time passes swiftly."

"I have a question," said a member of the group. "Those Tolzans—those monkey-men? What are they?"

"You have named them correctly. That's what they are—monkey-men. Just as I am a human mutant, they are monkey mutants. There were monkeys in your world, curious little beasts whom you suspected were your far-removed cousins. They also evolved, grew into creatures of great intelligence.

"We ignored them, but two centuries ago they began to challenge our supremacy, our right to be masters of this world. They are still challenging it."

There was unmistakable grimness in the Master's voice.

"Two centuries ago, there were eleven of us. We lived here in this world, detached, aloof, our only link with the past the cities our race had built and then discarded. Sentimentally we kept those cities clean and neat. There were no other men. We were the last of the race, and we thought ourselves immortal and omnipotent.

"Then the monkey mutants challenged us. We had great powers and we thought nothing of the challenge. That was our first mistake. We underestimated the enemy. When the first Tolzan attack was over, there were only two of us left alive. And if we were to remain alive, we had no choice except to hide.

"Now, these monkey mutants were devilishly intelligent. They asked no quarter and they gave none. The driving force of a young race was in them, and they were determined to rule, determined that men, who had for so many millenia been their masters, should be wiped out.

"Before we had completed this refuge, my companion died and and I was left alone. His death shocked me terribly. It was then I discovered that I, too, was doomed, that the Tolzan scientists had infected us with a subtle poison. My death was certain. All I could do was delay the day when it would strike.

"I was the last man and I was dying. This did not seem to matter much. I would die. There would be another race on Earth. What difference would it make?" For a moment the Master paused, as if in reflection.

"Then the old pride of race rose in me, the drive that has brought my kind down across the centuries. Should I let my race die out, let the last man die like a weakling here near the end of time? Should I betray the hopes and dreams of the past? No! Not while there was a single chance.

"I created the Karmaks, hoping they would be the race to come after me. But —they failed. There was little time left for other experiments; and unfortunately, while I could send my *mind* back through time, I could not send *myself*. It was then that I thought to reach back through time to another age in order to find the parents of a new race to inherit my world.

"That was why I brought you here. Not to fight the Tolzans, but to bridge the gap in time when the last man dies."

DAWSON'S mind was reeling. He no longer doubted. The Master was telling the truth. There was a plan and a purpose to it. The parts all fitted to-

gether like a blueprint: the blueprints, perhaps, of destiny.

"The point, my son," the Master said, "is that destiny has no blueprints. There are no signboards to the future. You travel by trial and error." He paused, and his eyes ran over the group.

"No one has asked the obvious question: Why did I reach back three-quarters of a million years, to your age, to secure the progenitors of a new race, when I could with greater ease have reached back three centuries, before the Tolzans came to power, and warned the Earth what was to happen?"

No one could answer him.

"There," the Master pointed toward Karmak, "is the answer! He has a perfect body, though no mind. I have an almost perfect mind, but a body that a child could destroy. Man must be both. One without the other is worthless. That was why I reached back to your age. I wanted a primitive type, a strong mind in a strong body, because I, who thought myself perfect, am one of destiny's errors, doomed to destruction . . ."

The Master's words ran off into silence. There was awe in the faces of the people who watched him. He had stood at the end of time, watching the doom of the human race come nearer and nearer, knowing that with him the last man died. He had stood there alone, the last of his companions gone.

But he stood alone no longer. Now others stood beside him.

Dawson stepped forward. "We understand now, Master. And we're ready to help."

A ghost of a wistful smile tugged at the Master's lips.

"Thank you—" He started to say something else, but another tremor came, stronger than the first. The whole room rocked. A warning bell tinkled, a red light flashed.

"What—what was that, sir?"

The Master pressed a button on the arm of his chair. The lights dimmed in the chamber. Simultaneously a screen lighted up.

They had forgotten, in listening to what they had been told, that there was a war outside. Now they remembered it. The screen was a mirror of harsh reality.

Outside the sky was ablaze with lights. A maze of ships, locked in desperate combat, was whirling like a pinwheel in the night. Bright streamers of flame were reaching out. When they touched a ship, the stricken craft burst almost instantly into incandescense, and came downward, down toward the earth, flaming like a falling star. When it struck another tremor shook the ground.

Now and again one of the round ships of the Tolzans fell. But more often the craft that took the sickening plunge was a slim torpedo.

"You said you were willing to help," the Master reminded them. "Are you willing to go out into that hell—and fight?"

FOR a second there was stunned silence. Out there in the bloody night a man would be whiffed to nothingness before a watch could tick twice. Everyone knew it. Together, the group numbered fifty-four. The Tolzans swarmed by thousands.

A voice growled an answer. Later Dawson would realize it was his own voice speaking. Another answered it, and another, until the room echoed with the sound.

"Give us ships! Give us guns! We'll fight! You're damned right we'll fight!"

"No," the Master said. "I was only testing you. Come. Someone please give me a hand."

At the Master's command Karmak came out of his sleep to aid him. So did

Dawson.

The aged patriarch was so weak, he could not walk alone. They helped him, Karmak on one arm, Dawson on the other. At the Master's orders they led him to another, larger chamber. It was an armory, a hangar. Ships were here, fighting craft, guns. One, larger and sturdier than the others, stood apart from the rest.

"Take me to that ship," the Master said.

They helped him into it. There was a specially designed control chair. They helped the Master into it, and Karmak took up his place behind one of the guns.

"Open that small box," the Master directed. "You will find a hypodermic needle in it."

It was Dr. Rutledge who took the hypodermic needle from its place. His eyes were filled with questions, but the Master bared his arm and sternly told him to use the needle. The white flesh did not bleed when the point went home.

"It will give me my old strength, for an hour," the Master said. "After that hour, what happens does not matter. I am going now. If I fail, take these ships and use them to fight your way clear. If necessary, flee to the planets. The ships will take you there."

Dawson's face was pale and sorrowful. "But why can't we get into these ships and take you away with us?"

"And leave the horde outside to follow you? No," said the Master stoutly. "Perhaps you will be able to find a refuge here on earth. At any rate, I leave you as my heritage all the knowledge your race has gained. It is recorded on tapes, and each ship contains a record. You will need centuries to understand it, but understand it you must. Your duty—and in this duty you must not fail!—is to provide the nucleus for a new race. That is all. Now close the door, please."

THEY stumbled out of the ship a little dazed at the Master's calm heroism. Inside, motors began to throb. The ship lifted and began to move forward. A huge door in the hangar swung upward, revealing a great tunnel slanting toward the surface. The Master's ship moved into it, moved upward and away.

He waved at them as he went out of sight. Then he was gone, with the faithful Karmak at the controls.

"He's going out to fight those monkey-men," Rutledge muttered doubtfully. "And he's a walking dead man, if I ever saw one. It seems very odd that he could cure us but couldn't cure himself. But possibly that was because he couldn't operate on himself. Say—where are you going?"

Dawson was striding purposefully toward the nearest ship.

"I'm going with him, after him. This is Armageddon, the battle at the end of time. He's gone out there to fight for us. If either of you think I'm going to stay here, you're both badly mistaken."

He jerked the port open, clumped forward into the ship.

"But he said—" Rutledge protested.

"I don't care what he said. I'm going!"

Rutledge climbed in quietly beside him. "Well, then, what are we waiting for?"

Dawson was about to snarl an answer. Then he saw the physician's face, and grinned.

"Not a thing, Rutledge, not a thing! Say—take a look at that!"

All the others had seen their two leaders enter the ship. Now they were counting off into crews—and each crew was choosing a ship!

"It looks like we're all going," Rut-

ledge grinned tightly. "Well—" The lock was suddenly opened. A youth entered. Rutledge took one look and grabbed him.

"*You're* not going, son," he said roughly. "You've been through enough already."

The boy's face lighted with the joy of impending battle.

"Take it easy, Dad," he grinned. "Give us young fellers a chance, huh?"

The physician's face worked strangely. He slowly relaxed his grip. Jack Rutledge slid behind a gun.

"Cut her loose," he sang out. "I want out, and I want action!"

"Close the lock," Dawson directed. The physician tried to shut it. It stuck. He opened it, to remove the obstruction —and Mary Nolan stepped inside.

"We'll make it a party," she said flatly.

"No," said Dawson firmly. "Women stay here. This is a fight."

"That's just the point, George."

"Don't be a stubborn little fool! You're not going, and that's final."

Dawson rose from his seat angrily. Mary faced him just as determinedly.

"If you go out there and die, what is there left for me?" she said.

KNOTS ribbed Dawson's jaw. He stood there undecided. Mary stared unflinchingly into his eyes. He sighed then, slipped back into the pilot's seat. Not another word did he utter.

The huge doors leading to the tunnel were still open. Dawson had watched Karmak operate a ship almost identical with this one on the rescue trip to the Tolzan prison. The controls were the same. Confidently he pushed the power bar forward.

And—nothing happened.

He jabbed at the bar again, viciously pushing against it. A click sounded then from the instrument panel, and a tiny screen came to life. Wavering lines began to etch themselves across it. An image began to form.

"It's a television screen," Rutledge whispered.

"Look—the picture!" Mary exclaimed.

On the screen was the face of the Master. He was in his ship out there in the night sky.

"Thank you for trying to help," his voice intoned. "I appreciate your loyalty. But I had foreseen that you would do this, against my orders, and I designed those ships so they will not move until I release them. I will fight the Tolzans. If I fail, I will release your ships, so that you may flee."

"But we want to help you!" Dawson fairly shouted back.

"The Karmaks are aiding me. Everything will be done that can be done. Remember—your duty is to live, not to fight and die."

The screen went dead.

"He's got some plan," Jack Rutledge said awesomely. "He knows some way to whip those monkey-men. He doesn't want us to get hurt."

"Yes," Dawson answered savagely. He was midway between profanity and tears. All his instincts made him want to fight his own battles, to stand on his own two feet. "He's got a plan, all right. It's for us—What the hell's that?"

At the entrance of the tunnel a figure had appeared. It glanced inside, then ducked out of sight.

"A monkey-man!" Jack Rutledge yelled.

"They've landed in the city," Dawson snapped, reaching for a hand gun in the rack on the wall.

He had been wanting a chance to get in this battle. Now the fight had come to him.

Dawson kicked open the door, fired

quickly, aiming at the tunnel. A jet of flame answered him. It struck the nose of the ship. White metal flared in incandescent droplets.

All over the huge hangar guns were firing at the tunnel entrance. The monkey-creatures would get a warm reception if they charged.

But the Tolzans did not attack. After what happened next, they couldn't.

Perhaps a carelessly aimed shot from one of the defenders caused it. Perhaps the Tolzans did it deliberately. No one knew for certain. But the huge door that blocked the tunnel fell suddenly into place with a rending jar.

"That stops 'em!" someone exclaimed in a satisfied voice.

"Yes, that stops them," Dawson answered grimly. He examined the door. The hideous truth was immediately apparent.

"It stops us too," he growled. "That door must weigh several tons. It's wedged into place so tightly, we can't budge it an inch. Even if the Master turns power into our ships, we can't get out of here."

"That settles it," Rutledge said hoarsely. "We're trapped!"

CHAPTER VII

Armageddon

"WATCH it," said Dawson tersely. He raised his gun and fired. Something squealed in the darkness and turned flip-flops and died. Dawson lowered the gun. His eyes roved through the blackness. "It must have been a member of that same landing party that trapped us down below," he said. "I don't see any more of them. But there's more around, you can bet."

The whole group had come up to the ground level. Even if the exit for the ships was blocked, there were ways they could crawl out.

"What are we going to do?" Jack Rutledge questioned.

"Watch and pray," his father answered. "And shoot when we get the chance."

He fired quickly, looked to see the effect of his shot, then shook his head.

"I aimed at a shadow that time." He glanced upward. "Anyhow, I don't think we can do anything to decide this battle. Everything depends on the Master. If he wins, we're saved. If he loses, our goose is cooked. And from the looks of what's going on up there—well, he's not winning."

The Master's ship was still visible in the sky. It was surrounded by a protective fleet of slim torpedoes—Karmak-manned ships that the Master had called to his aid. They gyrated in an endless dance, like fireflies on a summer night, circling the ship that held him. Surrounding them, at a greater distance, was a circle of Tolzan flyers.

Like wolves leaping in at the kill, the Tolzan fighters were darting, flashing their coruscating beams at the torpedoes, and darting out. Occasionally they didn't get out again. Instead they took the long drop to earth. But more often it was a torpedo ship that hissed downward from the sky.

Here, then, was Armageddon, the battle at the end of time. Two races fought to see which would inherit the earth. One, an old, old race, had savored all the ups and downs of history; the other, a new race, was rising like an evil star. There could be no quarter. Only one race would survive.

"The Master's getting whipped," a voice whimpered. "He's losing. He's running away!"

The circle of protective torpedoes was thinning. Undeniably the ship which held the Master was accelerating, slipping away toward the south.

The majority of the Tolzan flyers followed it, clinging like jackals to the scent of wounded prey. But others dropped back toward the city.

"They're coming down for mopping-up operations," Dawson muttered. "They've got their big game on the run, so now they're detaching small units to clean us up. Here," he ended aloud, "is where we get into this fight!"

QUICKLY he deployed his group into a building.

Nine small Tolzan ships hurtled down toward the city. Automatically the Karmak gun crews went into action. The major battle overhead had been beyond their range, but these diving flyers were coming close enough for effective targets.

The Karmak gun crews swept the sky with streamers of flame. Flame struck back at them from the diving ships. Here a building crumbled as flame touched it. Hollow explosions sounded, apparently coming from heavy bombs. Smoke and dust and debris flew skyward.

"What a crying shame!" Mary Nolan said. "It's a sacrilege to bomb such a beautiful city!"

"Well, it's certainly going up in smoke now," Dawson grated. "Ah! They got that one." He followed the trail of fire from a falling Tolzan ship.

"Those robot Karmaks fight like real soldiers," Rutledge commented wistfully. "You know, the Master must have a tremendous brain to control each of them individually. Why, there are thousands of them!"

"What the hell good is a brain," someone asked bitterly, "when a coward rules it?"

The ship of the Master was low on the horizon now. While they watched, it disappeared.

"He's running like a whipped dog with its tail between its legs," another of the group said disgustedly.

"Maybe he can't help it," Rutledge snapped back. "He's sick, near death. Perhaps the Tolzans are stronger than he thought. Anyway, who are we to judge a man like that?"

Of the nine ships that had dived downward, two got through the fire of the Karmaks. They disgorged their crews. The night was suddenly hideous with the shrill cries of the monkey mutants.

"They've located us," Dawson whispered. "It's all over now."

He had no hope of winning. The Tolzans numbered literally thousands of fighters. When they had cleaned out the robots, downed the ship of the Master, then they would swarm over this magnificent city. The handful of human defenders would be as ants beneath the trampling feet of an invading army.

Destiny had smiled on the human race for almost a million years. Now she hid her face. The human race was played out, finished, done. Here the brave march across the countless millenia ended, here in a ruined city a corporal's guard of humans fought the last fight.

Because of their heritage of battle, because they had learned to fight the hard way, they would go down to the last man and woman. And the last man would fling his weapon at the last attacker and die beneath the oncoming avalanche.

Men, even that superman the Master, were not the rulers of time and destiny. Everything must come ultimately to an end. Every brook reached the sea at last, every fight its finish. Now was the end of man.

AS HE entered that last fight, Dawson felt a little betrayed. He knew

the others felt the same way. The Master had brought them here. If *he* could not defend them, he should have let them die beside him.

True, his motives had been of the best. He was fighting to forestall the doom of the human race. But the people he had brought here wanted to fight at his side. He should have released the ships, permitted their occupants to enter the battle, let them die as men always had—not grub here in the darkness like cornered rats, unable to meet the enemy face to face.

Flashes from the Tolzan guns were coming in through the windows now, stabbing hungrily for their victims. A man cried out and collapsed to the floor, making a goggling sound as he tried to breathe. Flame danced at Dawson and he ducked, to rise and fire quickly over the sill. The whole side of his face felt as though it had been seared in a hot fire. The beam had barely missed.

Debris fell from the ceiling then, metal clanged, the very air grew hot and foul. In the darkness someone shouted shrilly.

"The building is about to fall! We've got to get out!"

True, the structure was fireproof. It wouldn't burn. But it would fall. And the guns of the Tolzans were tearing gaping holes in it.

"Into the open," Dawson ordered. "Courage, men!"

Taking a quick glance, he saw what was outside—a ring of fire from Tolzan guns. That was what they would have to face.

Grimly the men followed Dawson down the stairs, all that were left of them, and outside. They could have crouched on the stairs, where the Tolzan guns could not yet reach, but the building would have crumbled in on them. Dawson led them out. They would die, at least, as men under a starry sky.

With the shout of battle on his lips, Dawson kicked open the door and plunged out. Plunged out—into eerie darkness. The flame of the Tolzan weapons had died away. They weren't being fired.

For their erstwhile wielders were squealing in fright—and bolting like scared rabbits!

Wildly exultant the men of Earth mowed them down, nor even wondered for a moment why the Tolzan guns had suddenly lost their sting. It was pure slaughter, and the monkey-men died like pigs in an abattoir, screeching to the end.

"Look up!" Rutledge shouted suddenly. "There in the sky!"

SEVERAL of the Tolzan flyers had returned to renew the battle over the bombed city. A few of the Karmak's torpedo ships were hovering over them. But the horde of Tolzan ships were now falling, out of control, dropping like plummets, screaming downward toward the earth. Not flaming. They hadn't been struck. Just falling.

To the southward a great glow was in the sky. It was so vast as to resemble the sunrise. But the sun did not rise in the south. And this conflagration was mushrooming upward.

Gigantic streamers of flame were pushing skyward, reaching the upper limits of the atmosphere, going over higher. Vesuvius, in its greatest eruption, was never so terrible. A hundred volcanoes, erupting in violent concord, could not have created such an explosion.

Then the other sound came. It came in a blast of thunder. If all the cyclones that ever roared across the earth were gathered together into one cataclysmic outburst, the result could have been no more shocking. Violent sound waves tore at the air, frothed in it, buf-

feted it aside. Then the very ground shook mightily, and the surface of the earth undulated in gigantic rollers.

"It's the Tolzan fortress!" Dawson gasped, choking. "The Master exploded it!"

"And their ships are falling!"

Dawson's voice was filled with awe, almost reverence.

"The Master—he thought of everything. If we have survived, it is to him that we owe our continued existence."

Dawson got a grip on himself. "Well—there is still a reason for everything. Those Tolzan ships must have used energy transmitted by radio. When their fortress was blown up, no more energy was forthcoming from their central transmitter there. So—they simply fell to earth. And their weapons—their guns must have utilized radio energy, too."

"But I don't understand, sir," Jack Rutledge said. "Those Tolzan guns stopped firing before the Tolzan ships fell to earth."

Dawson nodded slowly. "We can only surmise what must have happened—even as we will never know from whence the Master came. Let us say that there were two power stations in the fortress—one to supply weapons and armaments with power, the other to carry warships through the skies.

"We must then assume that through mental projection, the Master must have contacted the brain of the Tolzan whose routine job it was to see the arms power supply continued to function smoothly. A routine job—a routine brain. Thus overpowered, this Tolzan shut off the supply, and his comrades bent on destroying us outside the hangar were left weaponless."

DAWSON searched the night sky with narrowed eyes. Here and there Tolzan ships, remnants of the deadly unnumbered horde, were hurtling groundward to eternity.

"This same Tolzan attendant, then," Dawson went on, "his mind figuratively bewitched by the overpowering projection of the Master's thought-waves, must then have found his way into the fortress' central power magazine—and set off an explosion which destroyed the remaining radio-power supply station. And," he added grimly, "this whole monstrous civilization with it."

The last Tolzan flyer had now crashed in a shower of flaming debris. But a few of the Karmak torpedo ships were still in the sky, floating aimlessly about, as if an unnatural power had relaxed the hands at the controls.

"The Master—he's released his control over the Karmaks!" Dawson whispered. But even as he spoke, the Master's great airship hove into view as the first rays of a rising sun—*the* sun, now—etched the horizon in a dawn of ethereal majesty.

As though at a single command, the last of the torpedo ships suddenly swung into life. In precise formation, they lined up behind the Master's flagship and headed together for the last time toward the vastness of space.

"He's finished," Rutledge husked. "And he's heading out to space to die!"

"The sun also rises!" Dawson choked. "See how it gilds the last guardians of the human race. For them, a blaze of glory. And for us, the promise of a new life."

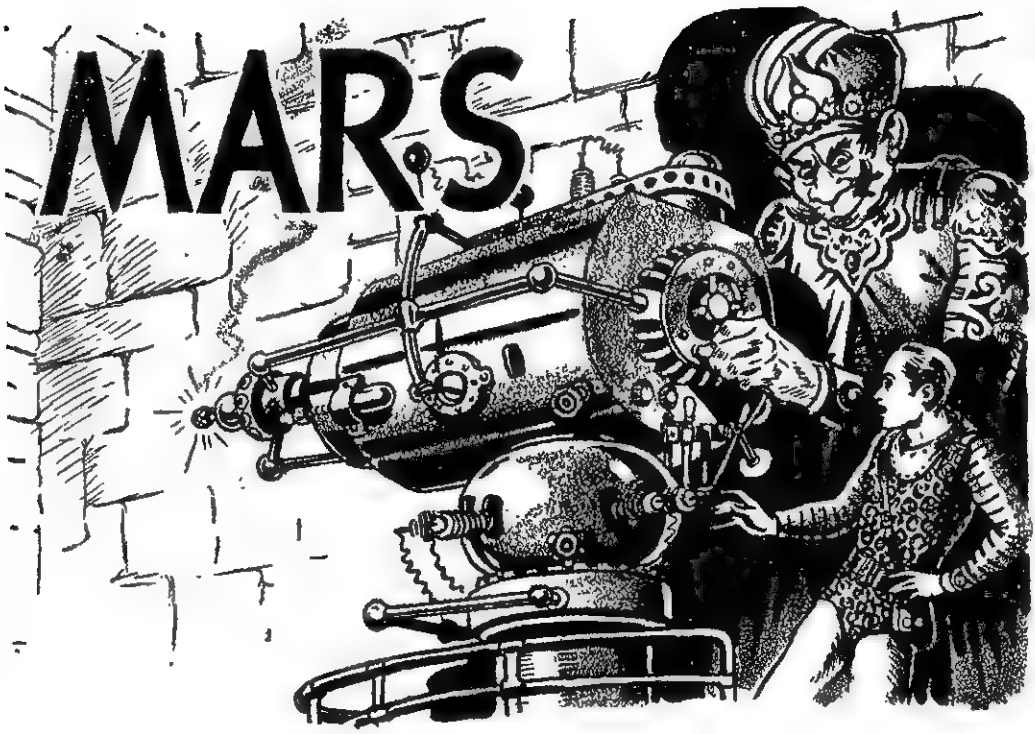
Only once did the Master's flagship falter in its course. Then and only then, it seemed as if the nose of the ship dipped fleetingly in a final salute . . .

Eyes wet with tears, Dawson turned to Mary Nolan, standing at his side with her arm about his.

"A new world!" he breathed huskily. "Not forever, but for our lifetime. For us, I think, that is quite enough."

Three of the Martians became monsters under the evolution ray

MARS



by FESTUS PRAGNELL

Don Hargreaves didn't have anything to do with the epidemic, but he was outlawed. Then he found there was *another* Don Hargreaves!

THE Imperial Palace, Mars.

Dear Festus:

"So you're getting bombs chucked at you, huh? I thought Earth was a dull place, and all the excitement was in Mars. Seems I was wrong.

"Thanks for copy of AMAZING STORIES with an account of that affair of Sommaly in it, which I see you have given the ridiculous title of 'Warlords of Mars.' I've had trouble enough, keeping the mag out of sight of Princess Wimpolo. I mean to say, I know I said that Wimps was not beautiful, judged by the standards of Earth, but I didn't mean she was such a fright as the picture shows her.

"Tell dear old Rap from me that if he hears of a number of strangely dressed men, all ten feet tall, walking through the streets of Chicago with queer boxes in their hands, he must get down the fire-escape *pronto*. Because they will be Wimpolo's guards after him with rayguns.

"Thank the readers for me for the interest they take in us. Tell them that Wimpo is a jolly girl and the bravest I've ever known, even if she is a trifle outsize. And, anyway, what other Earthling can boast nearly half a ton of wife, all in one piece? Because that is what I shall have, very soon. Another thing, too, why satisfy yourself

with these dull news agency reports of events in Mars? Why not hand them on as I tell them to you?

"You know what happened up to the time of my last letter. I came to Mars as a clerk in the employ of a mining company, but mutiny broke out among the miners. With Elsa Thorwaldsen, daughter of the manager, I ran away, and met one of the gigantic people of Mars, who live in caverns underground. The Martians gave me one of their deathray boxes, whose beams produce fields of force in which human nerves will not work. They also gave me a zekolo, a sort of Martian watchdog which looks like an octopus with the shell of an oyster and the pincers of a crab. Against death rays and zekolo the mutineers with their guns had no chance at all. Mutiny over, old man Thorwaldsen and his daughter turned nasty, and I went back to the Martians. Once in the deeper caverns of Mars there is no return, because of certain chemical changes that take place in one's blood.

"I found that the few Earthlings here, being small and agile among the gigantic, slow, lumbering Martians, were great favorites at the court of King Usulor, overlord of Mars; and Wimpolo, his daughter, soon adopted me as her special favorite. But I think the privileges accorded to Earthlings must have caused a lot of jealousy, because soon after that two nasty wars broke out, each one led by minor kings who wanted Usulor's position of overlord of the planet, Kings Sommalu and Bommelsmeth.

"Sommalu was easily dealt with, the chief trouble he caused being due to the recklessness of the Princess, who went spying in the enemy's country unattended. *What* a wigging her father gave her! I shivered in my shoes for fear that I would cop it too for not telling him of what she intended to do.

"Bommelsmeth did better. He had an army of ape-men, and actually succeeded in kidnaping Wimpolo out of the middle of her father's palace. But Wimpolo escaped with the help of Vans Holors, a Martian who is now wrestling champion of the planet. Bommelsmeth's own ape-men were turned against him, and Bommelsmeth's secret undersea hideout was flooded and wrecked.

"Immediately after that the princess made a public announcement. The scientists, she said, urged that to bring fresh virility to the Martian stock every Martian lady who could, should marry an Earthling. She, herself, set the example. And she had chosen for her husband me, Don Hargreaves. Everybody knows how brave I was and what I have done for Mars. That made me next in succession to the throne of Usulor, overlord of all Mars.

"So you see, Festus, even up to then I had not done so badly for excitement since I went spook-hunting with Elsa Thorwaldsen, in a Martian traffic tunnel that her father's men had accidently broken into. I'll bet you, with nothing but a few bombs falling around your house and dog-fights taking place in the air over your head, are green with jealousy.

"BUT we hadn't finished with Bommelsmeth and that's what I wanted to tell you. When we flooded his undersea cavern we thought that was the end of him, but it is easy to see now that his submarines could still get out through the locks, and the big cavern probably communicated with others above sea-level. Even on Earth we have caverns that run under the sea, and in conditions of lesser gravity, rock formations amazing to us readily become possible.

"The trouble started when Princess Wimpolo caught a cold. You could not see anything remarkable in that, but in Mars it was incredible. The first lady in all Mars, receiving a daily dose of twenty-six different vitamins, was supposed to be completely protected against all sickness and ailments whatever, apart from the results of overeating. (And *can* she eat! But never mind that.)

"The sneezes of that half-ton lady, Festus, would nearly blow your house down. I was standing in front of her in one of her spasms, and it lifted me six feet in the air. That may seem a lot to you, but you must always remember that the gravity of Mars is much less than that of Earth. She sent for her doctor and she stormed at him. He had been on the job only a month, the former doctor having failed to cure a headache of hers (A-tishoo! I carefully kept beside her). And look at the results of his administrations! A-tishoo!"

* * *

WHILE she was talking I felt a tickling at the back of my own throat. I badly wanted to sneeze myself. But I controlled it. The eye of the new doctor was on me, very cold. I felt sure that he didn't like me.

The doctor was apologetic. All the resources of Martian science would be enlisted in service of the Princess, but he feared that a new germ was abroad in Mars. Other ladies besides the Princess were suffering from the same trouble, most of them ladies who had taken Earthlings into their households.

He glared at me as he said this, making sure that I did not miss it. I knew what he meant. He was suggesting that we Earthlings had brought a new disease to Mars.

"Possibly the Earth scientists may be able to help us," he finished. Just then I sneezed myself. The Doctor leered triumphantly. Wimpolo looked at me thoughtfully.

"Run along now, Don," she said. "I'm not well. I'll send for you when I'm better."

I had been dismissed from the presence of the Princess. But if I really was infecting her it was better for me to leave her, for a time. However, I had only gone a little while when I was called for on the palace television system. This time it was old man Usulor himself, the big shot of Mars, who wanted me. As I went along I was wobbling at the knees pretty lively. Abrupt and frosty old King Usulor seldom took much notice of Earthlings. He put up with us because the Court ladies were so fond of us. He had never said whether or not he approved of my betrothal to the Princess. If I hadn't made myself useful in the troubles with Sommalu and Bommelsmeth I think he would have forbidden it.

As soon as I saw King Usulor I knew I was in for a stormy passage. Princess Wimpolo's new doctor was beside him, and old Usulor was glowering the way he does when he is all ready to explode.

"What's the meaning of this, Hargreaves?" he barked at me.

I nearly said, "What are your doctors doing if they can't tell you?" but what I said was,

"Does Your Majesty mean the Princess?"

"Who else?" he snarled. "You are hardly ever out of her sight."

Suddenly he sneezed. Then I knew why he was in such a bad temper. He had caught cold too. And I was being blamed for it.

"It's not my fault," I said.

"What?" he stormed. "The doctor here tells me it is your Earthly disease

of—of—"

"Influenza," supplied the doctor.

"It's no influenza," I said.

"What?"

"It has come on too quickly to be influenza. An hour ago I was all right. Now I feel ill," I said.

A strange weakness had come on me suddenly so that I could hardly stand up. The Martian doctor stepped forward.

"He is really ill. Your Majesty."

"Take him," growled Usulor. "Put him in quarantine. Don't let him infect any more of my people."

"And meanwhile," added the doctor, "find out exactly what he is suffering from and how to cure it."

I knew I was falling into a trap.

"I want to choose my own doctor," I tried to say, "and I want Professor Winterton."

NO notice was taken of me. A blanket soaked with antiseptics was thrown over me, and I was carried out on a stretcher. As I was jolted painfully down a long corridor, the doctor came behind us and I heard him chuckle, three or four times, as though at some rich joke.

We came to a room that was fitted out as a laboratory. There was a bed here, a bed surrounded by a glass screen. I was placed in the bed, and the doctor came and grinned at me.

"So," he said. "The little man was going to marry the first lady in Mars and be ruler of our planet, was he? Ha, ha! And then he woke up."

He stopped and picked up a tiny glass dart that seemed to be stuck in my side.

"Not bad, eh? The Paralyzing Drug gradually deprives the muscles of the power of movement. I shot it into you while you stood beside the Princess about an hour ago. Her sneezes drowned the slight noise. And so rapidly did the drug paralyze the nerves around your wound that they had no time even to transmit the sensation of pain. You did not know you had been struck. And didn't I judge it beautifully? I calculated your body-weight, the lapse of time, everything. The drug took effect while you actually stood in front of the King. Beautiful!"

I did not reply. The paralysis had taken hold of my tongue now. I could not speak.

"And my assistants among the doctors," he went on, "have given many people drugs that stimulate the mucous membranes of their noses into discharging violently to give them headaches and to deprive their muscles of strength. Presently King Bommelsmeth will raise the cry, "Rid Mars of Earthlings and their Influenza! People will rally to him. It will mean the end of your friends inside and outside of Mars."

Directly he mentioned Bommelsmeth I understood. So the rebel king was still alive, and plotting. I remembered now that he had boasted of having his spies in influential positions at the Court of Usulor, his enemy.

Soon the paralyzing drug had gripped all the motor nerves that carry impulses to the muscles, but the sensory nerves were still active, bringing me a sensation of sight and hearing. Involuntary muscles still kept my heart and lungs going, slowly. There was no intention that I should die, or that I should be saved from seeing or hearing anything that would cause me distress. But I could not blink an eyelid.

Four Martians were busy at some task I could not see, for my eyes were fixed on the distant ceiling. At each knock of the door they hastily covered their work.

Princess Wimpolo came. I heard

her enter, supported by two ladies in waiting. That pig of a doctor jumped up to meet her.

"Your Highness! This is not wise! You are ill."

"They tell me," Wimpolo said weakly, "that Don Hargreaves, my Earthling, is dead."

"Yes," she was told, "the science of Mars could not save him."

She wept as they helped her away.

Professor Winterton came, the Earthling who first persuaded me to live among the Martians, and Vans Holors, wrestling champion of Mars.

"Hard luck, boy," said Winterton, patting my shoulder.

"So you took the count, Don," said Vans. "But the end isn't yet. The championship isn't won yet."

They went out. I was alone with my enemies. I turned the words of Vans and the professor over and over in my mind. Dared I hope that they suspected the truth?

A messenger came.

"The King has ordered that a State Funeral and Cremation take place in two hours."

"But this is an unseemly rush," protested the sham doctor.

"The King has resolved on drastic measures to prevent the spread of infection," answered the messenger.

CHAPTER II

Troubles of a Corpse

MORE than once I have been congratulated on my ingenuity in finding my way out of awkward fixes. But this time I had no chance of using any ingenuity at all. I was stuck right where I was. Until the effects of the drug wore off or were neutralized, there I would remain.

The only part of me fully active was my brain. If there was anything in telepathy, now was the time to use it. I tried. I tried hard. I concentrated first on Wimpolo, then on the Professor, and then on Vans Holors. But whether there is no such thing as telepathy, or whether I didn't know how to transmit or they how to receive, I achieved no result that I know of except to give myself a headache.

The five Martian workmen kept busy. A large machine lurched from the wall. It had two arms and branching feathery fingers. The fingers of one arm felt all over my face, head and neck.

"Making a statue of you, Hargreaves," I was told.

I understood. The robotlike affair was a Martian copying machine.*

I wanted to know what the object of making the statue was, but of course I could not ask.

"Usulor has not given us much time," one Martian grumbled.

"No, but we can do it."

Presently they were satisfied with their work.

"A perfect likeness."

"Can't tell them apart."

"Say, wouldn't it be easy to send the wrong one to be cooked? Roast the statue and keep the real Earthling as a statue."

"Yes, that is exactly what we are going to do," said the Martian in charge, briskly. "Now, quickly! Time is short. Lift the Earthling out and put him on one side. Put the statue in the bed. Now, into this box with the Earthling. Cover him up. Ah! Just in time."

A blanket was thrown over me just as

* While one "hand" explored the shape of the head the other was producing a duplicate of it in plastic material which would afterwards be colored with an equally exact imitation of the original. These Martian statues were often uncannily realistic.—Ed.

the door began to open. I heard the voices of Vans and of the Professor and of others. They had come to take me to my funeral.

The dummy was taken away. Then the six Martians came back. Still in darkness I was lifted, carried. I felt the smooth motion of a Martian rolling traffic sphere under me. I seemed to travel for many miles.

* * *

NOW, this is what happened at my "funeral." Princess Wimpolo was sitting, sadly watching the proceedings, when one of her ladies-in-waiting came to her and whispered.

"One of the Earthlings wishes to speak to you, your Highness."

Wimpolo stirred.

"After the funeral," she said.

"He says it is very urgent."

"Who is it?"

"The one they call Winterton."

"Don's friend," murmured the Princess. "Let him come."

The tiny form of the white-haired professor stood beside the giant princess.

"What is it?"

"It's about Don."

"In my opinion, Princess Wimpolo," said the Professor, "Don did not die. He was murdered."

Wimpolo sat still, thinking.

"What reason have you for saying this?" she asked, presently.

"Two reasons, Princess. In the first place Don's death was too sudden. Earthlings do not die of sickness as quickly as that. In the second place Don does not look ill. See those red lips and cheeks and the firm, rounded arms and legs? Even through the glass sides of the coffin you can see. That is the body of a man who died suddenly, while he was in perfect health. Martians may be deceived, but not an Earthling.

"You delayed in telling me this," said she. "Ten minutes more and he would have been cremated and his ashes thrown into the sea beneath us."

She beckoned a lady-in-waiting.

"Tell my father to stop the funeral."

The Martian woman looked amazed.

"Quick!" Wimpolo ordered. "Tell my father to stop the funeral."

The lady-in-waiting hurried away.

King Usulor started in his seat when the Martian woman approached him. He frowned impatiently across at his daughter, then gave the order to halt the ceremony. Slowly he came to where his daughter waited on her couch, while thousands of Martians wondered what had happened.

"What new foolishness is this, girl? he demanded. "Haven't you caused me enough trouble with your wildness? Your Earthling, through no fault of his own, I suppose, has made you ill and me unwell. Let us get rid of the infection."

"Father, Don was murdered!"

"What?" Usulor thundered. "Have I not rid myself of all my enemies *yet?* Are they *still* around me?"

Turning to two guards he commanded, "Bring the coffin here!"

THE royal party was upon a sort of natural platform of rock, where all the assembled people could see them. On one side of the platform was a sheer drop to the sea. Down this precipice my ashes were to be shot into the water, after I had been cremated.

The glass coffin was brought and placed in front of King Usulor. What was supposed to be my body was clearly seen inside, such a perfect representation that even Winterton was deceived.

"Open the—" began Usulor, but got no further. His mouth fell open in amazement. A horrified startled cry came from all the people who were near

enough to see. Wimpolo and Winterton cried out in incredulous delight.

For the body in the coffin was moving. Its head turned. It looked first at Usulor, then at his daughter, then at the crowd. It lifted an arm and rapped three times on the side of its glass coffin.

It was, of course, an automaton, or robot, operated by distant control by means of television.

Guards and servants sprang to release me from my premature coffin. But the robot shaped in my likeness, or its distant operator, was too impatient to wait for them. The arm swung again strongly. The glass cover of the coffin splintered to fragments. The robot climbed stiffly out. As a dead man coming to life, its mechanical movements were grimly realistic.

The robot's head turned, and it looked about it woodenly. Its face was not shaped to express any feelings.

"I thank your Majesty," it said, suddenly and harshly, "for these preparations for me. But as you see I am not dead."

Wimpolo, first of all those present to recover her wits, moaned.

"That's not his proper voice. And that queer look on his face! He must be very ill. Attendants! Look to him."

A dozen Martians, men and women, jumped to obey. But the robot's attitude changed. A queer pistol was suddenly in its hand. It was one of Bommelsmeth's dissolving rays, the most dangerous weapon known to Mars.

"Stand back," came the harsh voice.

Wimpolo leaned back in her couch.

"It isn't Don!" she whispered to those about her. "See how my pet snake is hissing at him! That snake would never hiss at Don. It knows him too well."

"Listen to me," snarled the robot's radio voice. "I did not die of sickness. I only went into a coma, from which I have now recovered. But all the Martians who take the sickness will die. It is too late to stop it. All you Martians, heed my words! Earth will destroy you all. We Earthlings need your planet, and we shall take it. If the sickness does not destroy you, our weapons will. As now I destroy your Princess!"

And the deadly ray came up to aim straight at Wimpolo's bosom.

HAD I been there I am sure I could have reached the metal monster in time to knock his arm up. The Princess' snake or her zekolo could have done it too, but they waited for the word of command before going into action. In all Mars there was probably only one native quick enough in thought and movement to save the Princess. That man was Vans Holors. Holors made a wild plunge. Even for him it looked impossible to cross the space without being shot down, but it took a small fraction of time for the distant operator to see what was happening and to move the controls accordingly.

Taking the only certain way, Vans made a flying leap at the animated dummy. His enormous weight caught the robot squarely. It was impossible for Vans to stop his rush in time to save himself. Vans and the little robot vanished over the edge of the precipice together, to plunge into and sink beneath the waves.

The crowd thought that Vans had given his life, that the deadly ray had caught him full in the chest; but as a matter of fact the discharge expended itself harmlessly on the rocks.

Bommelsmeth's devilish scheme had been, of course, that the robot should murder Princess Wimpolo and then dive into the sea and get away. I would, of course, get the blame for the crime, and

a nasty popular demand to rid Mars of all Earthlings would arise.

By the courage and promptitude of Holors, Wimpolo was saved. But the damage had been done, all the same. Plenty of it! The robot's words, threatening all Mars, had been heard by thousands of Martians. They had also seen the dummy's attempted assassination of Wimpolo. Everywhere where Earthlings were in Mars, they felt a change in the atmosphere. Their gigantic hosts were turning against them.

Meanwhile Usulor, purple with rage, was spouting orders as fast as he could get the necessary breath out of his lungs.

"Cancel the funeral! Arrest Don Hargreaves! Arrest the Princess' doctor for telling us that Hargreaves was dead! What are you waiting for? Hargreaves is in the sea? Well, dive in after him! Hunt him with snakes and zekolos. Find him, find him, I say! And arrest every Earthling in Mars. See that they do no more mischief."

He stopped to sneeze. The Earthlings were the cause of that too, he reflected.

"And to think," he said to himself. "If I had only fixed things for a few minutes earlier I'd have had him safely cremated before he came round."

CHAPTER III

Bommelsmeth Again

I KNEW nothing about the tumult caused by the funeral of my dummy. I supposed that the dummy had been duly cremated, and that the court and the Earth colony of Mars mourned me as dead. That I was being hunted as an assassin, while the Earthlings on Mars, thrown into prison, blamed me as the cause of their troubles, I had no idea.

I felt the traffic tunnel that I was in going up and up. Suddenly I was taken out of my box and could look around once more. We were on the surface of Mars, in the full glare of the sunlight. which harmful to the Earthly eyes, was tinted grey to tone down the harsh light which, harmful to the Earthy eyes, was even more dangerous to the Martians.

We rolled across a wide, saucer-shaped plain that had once been an ocean-bed. Many miles on we came to a mountain range, and here the sphere plunged into a hole that proved to be the entrance to a system of minor caverns. Even out here the Martians could not get out of their habit of boring themselves tunnels and caves to live in.

We went in through air-locks. We passed armed sentries, heard shouted words of command. These were obviously the secret headquarters of an army. It was cunning. Of all places where Usulor, with his television, might search for a hideout of his enemy, the one place where he would not look was on the surface of the planet. For it was supposed that no Martian could live long on the surface owing to chemical changes that take place in their blood there.

Presently a Martian picked me up with one hand and carried me out of the sphere. I found myself before a lean, sardonic Martian with red, inflamed eyes. It was Bommelsmeth. The resplendent uniforms and the luxury with which he had formerly surrounded himself were gone. Now he had ordinary clothes and a single badge. The furniture was plain. He was thinner now. Before he had been overbearingly confident. Now he was desperately ferocious.

I was carried in, stiff as a poker, and dropped in front of him.

"What's this?" he growled.

"Don Hargreaves, Earthling, in a cataleptic state, but conscious, as you directed, chief."

The elaborate court etiquette that Bommelsmeth had once insisted on was gone. His men called him shortly, "Chief."

A slow smile of triumph came over the face of the former King.

"Ah yes, I remember. I have a memento from him." He pulled up his left trouser-leg. "See that?" It was a long scar. "You did that, with your sword, when we fought in the cabin of my submarine. Then, I was a great King. Now, I am a fugitive, with but a handful of followers. You did that too. I wanted to see you to thank you for all these favors."

He stirred me with his foot.

"Is he alive?"

"The drug produces the appearance of death very convincingly chief. He hears what you say and understands it."

"Then bring him round," directed Bommelsmeth, "but first chain him to a ring in the wall by his neck. I know him. He moves very fast. Once you let go of him you'll never get hold of him again."

"Bring him round and he will die, chief. The Krypton in the atmosphere."

"Ah, yes, I forgot. Not that it matters much. Give him the treatment I discovered to dissolve the krypton out of his blood safely."

A cloth soaked with some sweet smelling liquid was held to my nose. I felt strangely light-headed. Then the cloth was taken away. Somebody grunted to somebody else. The end of a tube was forced down my throat, and something warm squirted directly into my stomach.

SLOWLY, very slowly, my frozen body began to thaw out. I was racked with pain, cramp, stiffness. My eyes were very sore, but I would not let Bommelsmeth see that I was hurt.

"You took a lot of trouble to rid yourself of one small Earthling, Bommelsmeth," I said.

"True," he said, considering the point carefully. "Possibly true. But still the process, or, should I say, the experiment? has been worth the trouble. I have got you here, and everybody thinks you dead. Next, I shall do the same with Wimpolo, then with Usulor, and then with all the officials and army generals of Usulor who are opposed to me."

He took a drink. I must have let him see that I was thirsty by the way my eyes followed his glass, for he called for another, and ordered that all his men present should drink. But none was offered to me.

"Now," he said in pretended affability," let's get together. Let's understand each other. There are several points on which Usulor and I do not agree. The chief one is Earthlings. My slogan is, "Kill all Earthlings! That right, my men?"

The Martians roared their approval.

"Right! Kill all Earthlings!"

"You hear Hargreaves? But I've got a special treat first. Men! Wheel in the transformation box!"

My heart jumped painfully when I saw what was being wheeled in. It was Bommelsmeth's big invention, his evolution controlling ray.*

* Bommelsmeth, with fiendish genius, had discovered the natural radiation that, beating ever on Earth and Mars out of space, produces evolution. The men of Mars, living in their deep caverns, had been shielded from this radiation for long ages, and their evolution had stopped.

Bommelsmeth could produce evolution at will, or reverse it. The ray turned living men into apes, the apes into monkeys, the monkeys into reptiles, the reptiles into fish, the fish into marine worms and the worms finally into a primitive protoplasmic slime that could not be seen.—Ed.

"Cheer up Hargreaves!" gloated Bommelsmeth. "You are going to take part in a great scientific experiment!"

* * *

WHEN Vans Holors, realizing more quickly than anybody else the danger to Princess Wimpolo, threw his own life instantly into the balance to save her, he had not realized that he was attacking a metal dummy. He understood that it was not me, but thought it was another Earthling who was my double. If it had been Vans would certainly have been cut down.

Now the dummy was about the same weight as myself, and Vans I would say at a guess to be about thirteen feet tall and well over a ton in weight. He swung his left arm to knock up the ray-pistol that menaced him and his right to the side of the dummy's head. The dummy's arm was stiff, not being on a universal joint like a human ball and socket shoulder-joint, which can move in any direction. Instead of knocking the dummy's arm up Vans knocked the dummy itself high up in the air, spinning like a fly wheel. The melting-ray was still in action, while the distant operator of the dummy vainly tried to guess from the amazing blur that reached him from the dummy's radio television eyes what in Mars had happened.

Fortunately, the ray whirled around too rapidly to do any damage. Vans' right arm, meeting no obstruction, threw him off his balance, and Vans, unable to stop himself, rushed headlong over the precipice into the water.

To the stoutest and strongest man in Mars that was nothing. Vans took no more notice of falling in the sea than a healthy Earthling does of being caught in a light shower or rain. Provided, that is, that he hit no rocks.

This was Funeral Rock. From it the ashes of thousands upon thousands of Martian Kings, Queens, Princess and Princesses had been shot into the water after cremation. The spot had been chosen because of its clean drop into very deep water.

Vans came up, annoyed. The dummy's head was stuck up, nose under but eyes staring across the mirror-smooth surface. A leg-stroke brought Vans alongside.

"Make me get wet, would you?" he growled, giving the dummy a box on the ears.

The blow would have stunned any Martian or broken any Earthling's neck. Vans took a leisurely leg-stroke to where he judged that the body would come up again.

The dummy popped up, settled down, rose again and bobbed about until it was still. Its eyes were still open. It still looked alive, although one side of its head was dented like an empty can. Vans stared. No blood came from the wound, no flesh showed, only metal.

Vans shuddered. He brought his fist straight down on the top of the head of this horrible thing that could not be killed.

This time the dummy did not disappear. Its foot had become entangled in Vans' clothing.

Just then the distant operator, realizing that his dummy was getting damaged, threw a switch. A small motor began to hum, a small popeller began to buzz in the rear end of the dummy, and the dummy, towing Vans behind it, set out to sea at some sixty knots.

Thousands of Martians, watching, confidently, this struggle between their wrestling champion and the Earthling who had tried to assassinate their Princess, gasped amazedly as the Earthling began all at once to swim out to sea, going faster than any living creature had ever swam before and drag-

ging their helpless champ with him.

My reputation as an agile, swift and dangerous person increased a whole heap.

BUT Vans knew now that it was not a man but a machine that held him. The dummy was not using its limbs to swim with, but a hidden propeller. Vans felt the urge of the water. He understood why he had been unable to kill the creature.

Vans, however, had come close to killing the dummy. His blow on the top of the thing's head had put one television eye out of action and damaged the other. The operator was now getting only a partial and obstructed view in his television panel. He did not know that Vans was there still, being towed along. The machine's reduced speed he put down to the damage to the motor inside it.

Buffeted by the surge of water, Vans struggled to get a better grip on the machine and find some way of stopping it. The speed and the waves beat him. It was luck for Vans that he, like all Martians, was a powerful swimmer.

The machine took a sudden dive. Vans was dragged down, a light from the dummy's head showing the way dimly. Into a hole in the rock wall it dived. Vans saw he was in an underwater cavern.

The cavern opened out. He came up and was able to breathe. There was a sloping beach on his right about a quarter of a mile long. On it was a group of small houses. High up the beach about a hundred or so people sat with their backs to the high cliff. They were curiously still. There were men and women, both Earthlings and Martians.

Now or never, thought Vans, I must break loose from this thing. He now knew how the head of the robot was attached to its body and tried to wrench it off.

The robot's body filled with water. With a gurgling of bubbles it sank. Vans disengaged himself, and swam cautiously for the shore.

More lights were being switched on on the beach. Vans could see now, with a queer jump of his heart, that the people who sat and leaned against the cliff had no faces; only blank spheres of metal. They were more robots like the one that had dragged him to their home. Not yet had they been given the semblances of human faces.

Two Martians came out of the nearest hut and walked to the edge of the unrippled water. Vans hid carefully behind a rock.

"Not a trace," said one.

"It sank, I reckon," said the other.

"I don't wonder. Did you see the smashes that wrestler fellow gave? Amazing that it got as far as this."

"Now see here, Torkwiss, never tell anybody about that."

"Why not?"

"Can't you see how mad the chief would be if he knew? Such a colossal mess of our first experiment with a robot. Nearly lost the dummy."

"If it had been cooked and thrown in the sea we'd have lost it then, all right."

That wouldn't have mattered. The robot would have gone and none of Usulor's people would have known there was a robot. But if that wrestler fellow had busted the machine and it had been captured, then the chief's plans would have been given away. Bad enough to have them coming to open the coffin and having to make the thing bust loose. Nearly killed the Princess dame first. Bad luck we didn't get her, but to have given away the secret of the robots would have made the chief foaming mad. He

might have ordered that we be kept here forever. You know that it is impossible to escape from here except by the help of a robot. No Martian could hold his breath long enough to get through the long tunnel that runs under the sea."

"What are we going to do then?"

"I am going to get another robot to fish out the Hargreaves dummy. Then we must patch it up quick. And say it was never injured. Get me?"

"I get you."

CHAPTER IV

Transformation

AS VAN HOLORS watched in the secret cavern, the two Martians went back to their hut. Presently came a low whine of machinery and two dummies with blank metal spheres for heads rose jerkily from their places and walked into the water. Presently they were in deep water, then they turned themselves over on their faces, their headlamps shining down while they searched the bed of the lagoon. That was unsuccessful. The dummies turned upsidedown, like ducks searching for food in a pond. Their legs, from the knees upward, stuck straight up out of the water. In slow, widening circles the legs roamed about the water.

Vans judged that it was time to attack. Keeping carefully in darkness, he walked toward the side of the huts. He tripped against an unseen wire. At once a brilliant light shone forth, and the two dummies rose to their feet and lurched toward him.

Vans ran for it. He gained the hiding of a rocky crevice without having the searchlight shine on him, but at the cost of making some noise.

Three more Martians came out of the huts, walking toward where the two dummies were slowly revolving their blank heads and lights at the unseen wire.

"Nothing to be seen," said one.

"A snake, I reckon," said another.

"A snake would glide under the wire."

"Huh! What would *you* say it was, wise guy?"

"The lost dummy."

"You're crazy."

"I'm not. That dummy's motor was still running when the television control went wrong. It may be still walking about. The other two dummies can't find it."

"What'll happen to it?"

"It'll just keep walking until it smashes itself up. Remember that dummy that got out of control last week?"

"Or until it gets stuck in the mud," said another, looking at the trail of mud and weeds left by one of the dummies that had taken part in the unsuccessful search.

Another Martian came out of that hut.

"What are you three doing there? Haven't you anything better to do? That dummy's got to be found. Back to your controls. Get every dummy that's in working order on the search."

"Luce says the dummy is still walking around, boss."

"Rot, that wrestler fellow bashed it two heavy clouts on the head. I hope he broke his fingers. The dummy was just able to limp back before it broke down. A wonder that it got as far as it did."

They went back to their huts. One by one the dummies jerked to their feet and strode down to the water. Vans slipped into the water, too. He had an idea.

* * *

HERE, I regret to say I have to report an unpleasant piece of scandal. A Martian lady sat upon the lap of a Martian gentleman. No harm in that, but this particular lady was Olla, wife of Vans Holors.

"So the court decided that the big boob is dead, and you get his money?" the man said, with a grin.

"Yes, about time, too. The big grizzly bear. I still have the bruises from the great hug he gave me when he won the championship."

"He did save the Princess," remarked the man, feeling that there was something to be said in the dead champ's favor, after all.

"Yes, left me a widow just to save that cat! Shows how little he thought of me!"

"Never mind, duckie," he said, patting her. "Won't we have a good time on his money!"

"You bet we will!" she squealed with delight.

I fear that honest, simple Vans has one weakness. He can't handle women.

* * *

"NOW," explained Bommelsmeth, like a lecturer. "You know that my evolution reversing ray acts not only on the chromosomes of the germ-like cells, which carry inheritance, but are so intense that all the cells of the body are affected. All those cells, hair cells, skin cells, muscle cells, forget their highly evolved complicated processes, relapsing into simpler forms. As an athlete grows old and loses his speed and strength. But now I have speeded up my processes enormously. Processes that take nature millions of years to carry out I could accomplish in a few weeks. Now I take only a few minutes.

"And I can speed up evolution, as well as reverse it. So far, however, I have had no useful results, only queer freaks. I think it's because I have used the ray on Martians only, up to now. I haven't tried it on an Earthling yet. Our natural evolution has stopped, and it can't be started again suddenly. Try to start it too abruptly and it loses direction. I'll show you. Bring in the prisoners."

The Martians were dragged in, their arms tied behind them. I saw that they were soldiers of Usulor's army. They glowered at Bommelsmeth. They were tied to the wall, and the evolution speeding-ray aimed fully at them.

At the sight of the hideous machine they cried out and tried to break loose. Bommelsmeth laughed, and switched on his ray.

Minutes passed, and only heavy breathing was to be heard as the four Martians tried to break their bonds. Soon their struggle stopped. Instead of rage and despair a blank amazement spread over their faces.

Slowly, yet not so slowly that they could not be watched, the most incredible changes were taking place. Hair was sprouting on smooth skin. Hair was changing to fur, into feathers, into scales, heads were changing in size and shape. Arms, legs, and bodies were getting longer or shorter.

Evolution, kicked violently into action after its sleep of ages, was running wild. It was producing incomprehensible, horrible changes in those four men.

The beam was a circle of pale yellow around them. The actual ray, I knew, was invisible, the yellow light being added for safety. Without it, Bommelsmeth's men or even Bommelsmeth himself might accidently walk into the beam.

The clothing of the four Martians and their bonds crumbled into dust as the ray worked its will on cloth, leather,

fur and rubber. But no longer were there four men. Four strange creatures, one a great bird, one a sort of crocodile, one a sort of octopus, and one something like a kangaroo, stared at me.

Bommelsmeth flicked off the switch.

"You see," he said. "Four more failures. All right men, clear up the mess."

A sweeping deathray ended the horror, stretching the four monstrosities motionless. They were dragged away.

"Now," said Bommelsmeth, "we'll give the Earthling a dose." I was lifted and placed where the unfortunate Martians had stood, tied to the wall. Bommelsmeth flicked his switch. The pale yellow beam impinged around me.

CHAPTER V

Vans in Action

KING USULOR, overlord of all Mars, puffed great clouds of Martian tobacco. He was satisfied with himself. He had lopped off the head of the Princess' doctor. It amused him that all the other doctors whose clients had got the Earth sickness had bolted at once to a distant country. Good riddance! As a proof of the wisdom of Usulor all the colds had got better at once, his own, the Princess', and everybody else's. No more giant sneezes boomed through the palace, blowing down pictures and breaking crockery.

The only fly in the ointment, from Usulor's point of view, was the fact that Don Hargreaves had got away. The most thorough search with trained Zekolos failed to discover any trace of the treacherous Earthling's body. He had offered rewards for the finding of Don.

Usulor frowned as the door of his private room opened and somebody came in unannounced. But his frown faded when he saw that it was Wimpolo, his daughter.

"Must you barge in on me like this," he protested. "Couldn't you call me on the television?"

"And you have switched the television off," she snapped.

"Well, I didn't want to be disturbed."

Wimpolo coughed.

"Dad," she said, sharply, "I wish you wouldn't smoke this vile tobacco!"

"Why not, Wimpolo? I like it. I gave an Earthling a mouthful of it once. Ha, ha! The tiny creature was unconscious for two hours."

"You're cruel," she snapped.

He stared at her.

"You know," he said, thoughtfully, "sometimes I think a good spanking would do you good."

"What?"

"You heard, I've spoiled you. I've let you do as you like. I let you bring these Earthlings right into Mars and into my court. I knew all along it was a risk. But you and the other ladies took a fancy to these tiny men and women who can jump nearly twice as high as our heads. You even announced that you were going to marry one of them, and the scientists backed you up. I said nothing, but I see now that I was foolish. The right sort of hsuband for you would be Vans Holors, the wrestling champion. He'd keep you in order. And he'd make a good king, too."

Wimpolo gave a most unladylike snort.

"The big boob! All brawn and no brains! Have you seen the way that cat, Olla, twists him round her litttle finger?"

"Yes, yes, that's right. All the same, Wimpolo, the big brainless boob saved your life when your darling Don tried to burn a hole through you."

"That wasn't Don," she barked, angrily.

"What!" shouted Usulor. "Am I mad? Is all my court mad? Are all my guards mad? Are thousands upon thousands of the Martian public mad? All those who were watching in their television sets, too? We all saw him. Who do you say it was? Some other Earthling, disguised? If so, it was the best disguise ever heard of. And in any case every other Earthling in Mars is ruled out. I checked on them, just to make sure. Every Earthling who was not actually present at the time has an unbreakable alibi."

"Some of the ladies who have charge of Earthlings would say anything to save their pets," Wimpolo said.

THE darling girl would have done anything to get the notice making me an outlaw withdrawn. And, as she said, some of the Martian ladies were very fond of their pet Earthlings, just as Earth ladies are fond of their pet pekes.

Usulor snorted.

"Do you think I accepted the word of the ladies? They speak as their feelings guide them. No. I asked the husbands of those ladies. Wimpolo, little one, you've got to face it, no matter how much it hurts. It was your Don who tried to murder you. I say he isn't safe. When I think you are in danger remember that I am still your father and still the ruler of Mars. I've got all the other Earthlings under lock and key, and as soon as Don is found, or his body, I shall start the trial. Of all of them. They will be charged with being a danger to Mars."

"With the verdict already decided against them," she stormed, "and a sentence of death awaiting them all."

"It is scientifically impossible to return them to Earth," he said. "Execution is therefore the only way."

"You are a brute and a bully," she screamed, and rushed out.

He stared after her.

"I *ought* to spank her," he muttered. "Can't think why I don't."

IN THE undersea cavern Vans Holors slipped into the water without a sound. Dozens of robots, or remote control dummies, were swimming about slowly. Their feet stuck up out of water, and the searchlights on their heads lit up the muddy, weedy bed of the lagoon most oddly. Once or twice a dummy hooted excitedly, but each time it proved to be only a fish, crustacean or snake on the ocean bed that had been taken for a metal man partly concealed by mud and weeds.

Vans was in no danger of being seen from the shore. But he was in danger of being seen by one of those pairs of television eyes. He paddled cautiously about.

Presently one of the dummies wandered away from the rest, searching in shallow water. Vans crept up to it. Seizing its heels he forced it down sharply. The head was buried in mud.

"Another dummy out of order," thought Vans.

He dived. Other dummies were coming up. In a few seconds he had pulled the body of the dummy away from the buried head. The body filled with water and sank. Vans pulled out the head and swam away with it to a hidden alcove.

Vans had got himself somewhat muddy, but that only helped his plans. He tore the machinery out of the metal head. It left a metal sphere that with some difficulty he managed to fix over his own head. The holes where the television eyes had been, enabled him to see out.

Slipping back into the water, he swam

around. Then, walking in a way as like the jerky, marching step of the dummies as he could manage, he went ashore. He didn't trouble to find the gap in the wire. He just walked through it, tearing it down. Luckily it was not barbed. Then he went on around the huts and round behind them.

He heard somebody shout, "Zolweis, your dummy is out of order walking round on its own."

"Where?" shouted Zolweis, running out.

"It's gone behind the huts."

Zolweis went after Vans with a large spanner. He lifted Vans' coat. Then he gasped when instead of a metal plate with nuts he saw white flesh. Before he recovered from his surprise Vans' fist broke his neck. The wrestling champ had a short way with people who tried to assassinate Princess Wimpolo.

"Now *you* are out of order," said Vans.

VANS picked up the spanner and went to the end hut. Three Martians at their machines looked up to see a dummy walk into their hut. One of them came up with a spanner. The dummy swung its own spanner, killing him, then with a rush was on the other two.

Vans looked round. He had accounted for four. How many more were there?

A Martian came running into the hut.

"What's the matter? Why are so many dummies out of order?"

"Four humans out of order," corrected Vans. "And you are the fifth."

He went out, jerkily, straight into the larger hut. The toughest, strongest man in Mars was not afraid of a dozen ordinary Martians. He saw eight. His spanner reduced that number to six before the others realized what was happening.

Fighting a mechanical man gone haywire was a problem. No use trying deathrays on it. Two of the surviving Martians began to fetch their own dummies out of the water to defend them. The other four rushed straight at Vans, trying to throw him on the floor by sheer weight. They did not know they were attacking the most dangerous man in Mars. When they did, if they ever did, it was too late.

In an instant more, Vans was on the other two. One man ran, but the hurled spanner struck him in the back of the head.

"Huh! grunted Vans, panting slightly, "how can you expect to keep your dummies working properly when you yourselves get out of order so easily?"

Just then two machine men came charging through the doorway. They were two dummies recalled from the water by the last two operators to survive.

The Martian who had fought and killed thirteen other Martians with a spanner had no fear of two machine men. The two were proper robots with a dim intelligence animating them. Their last orders had been to kill Vans Holors. They came on with the dogged persistence of machines.

Vans hit them so hard that they flew through the air. One smashed into a large machine from which a steady hissing sound had come, silencing it.

Vans went out. The rest of the dummies were going all ways, lacking direction from their operators. One by one they collided with one another or with rocks, broke, filled with water and sank.

"A clean up," said Vans, rubbing his hands together.

"Yes, it certainly was a clean-up," agreed a harsh voice.

Vans swung around.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Switch on the television and you will

see."

Vans did. The lean face of Bommelsmeth appeared on the screen.

"How do, Holors," he grated.

"How do, King Bommelsmeth," returned Vans grinning. "I have rather dented your dummies and their operators."

"Yes," said Bommelsmeth, nodding. "I agree that you have dented my dummies. Incidentally, in doing so you have closed yourself up in a living tomb from which you can never escape. I have seen, although by bad luck I did not turn on the television from my end in time to prevent your clean up, as you call it. Still, as you have cleaned yourself up as well, it's not so bad. I lose thirteen men and a lot of machinery, but at the same time I rid myself of one of my most dangerous enemies. Quite a bargain, from my point of view."

"What do you mean?" growled Vans.

"I mean that I have given orders for the tunnel leading out of that cavern to be sealed up with millions of tons of rock. The only other way out of that cavern is by water. And you can't swim it. It's too far. You'd drown if you tried. Only if you are towed by robots can it be done. And you've smashed all the robots! Ha, Ha! To make things even better, you've broken the air-purifying plant. The foul gases that come out of the water will kill you within a few days. Ha, ha, ha! Goodbye!"

Vans watched in fascination. As Bommelsmeth showed in the television screen, a little figure was creeping behind him. It was me, and Vans says I looked subtly changed. I was even smaller than before, with quick, darting eyes. I leaped through the air toward Bommelsmeth. Vans says I moved with the speed of a bullet out of a gun.

Then the television screen went blank.

CHAPTER VI

Paths of Evolution

BOMMELSMETH eagerly watched the effects of his evolution-hastening ray on me. With all his faults, he was a keen scientist.

"It's not working," one of the Martians growled disappointedly. Let me ray him. It's not safe to keep him alive."

"It is working," Bommelsmeth insisted. "I can see changes in him already, slow changes. It is exactly as I thought. Evolution in Earthlings is still proceeding, and my ray hastens the process naturally, not violently and disastrously. Now, what are the Earthlings evolving into? I wouldn't miss this opportunity for anything."

All I could say about Bommelsmeth's ray at the moment was that it was damn painful. It hurts a baby to draw its first breath and to cut its first tooth. It hurt me to evolve. Queer aches racked my whole body. I groaned and shuddered. I exaggerated these pains, groaning and shuddering much more violently than I need have done. I pretended to fall in a faint.

Bommelsmeth took no notice, except to adjust his machine so that I still got the full benefit of it as I lay in the stone floor of the rough cavern.

"He's getting smaller!" one of the Martians exclaimed, suddenly.

"Yes," said Bommelsmeth. "The tiny creature is getting smaller than ever. Yet I see no signs of his developing, as yet, an enlarged head with a bigger brain and no hair or teeth. The head, in fact, is diminishing in size along with the rest of the body. Now, what can be the reason for that? Does the tide of the evolution ebb and flow like the sea on the shore? Are Earthlings at the present time losing intelli-

gence instead of gaining? Or does that apply to this one Earthling only? Or will the developing small brain be more efficient than the old big one?"

"I think I can answer your questions," another Martian said, thoughtfully.

"Well do."

"The human race on earth is at present splitting into two separate branches. One branch will be very small and active, like this example. The other branch will grow big, with large brains, and will move about very slowly. In time, no doubt, they will lose the power of walking and be carried everywhere on machines run by smaller men of action. Both branches will be far more intelligent than the present race of Earthlings, but will be specialized. If we could get hold of, say, Professor Winterton, and ray him, we might get an example of the big, huge-brained Earthling, hardly capable of movement, who would be to this creature before us —"

"The natural counterpart," I think he was going to say, but he got no further.

I had certainly been getting smaller, and losing weight too.*

With my general reduction in size, my hands were also getting smaller, so that soon they were able to *slip out of the iron rings that held them.* Bommelsmeth hadn't thought of that.

I slipped out my hands, behind my back. Then, in one movement, I jumped to my feet and leaped.

WHAT a leap! I was not yet accustomed to my new powers. I could always jump high in the light gravity of Mars. Now I could clear thirty feet.

I seemed to fly like a bird. I went high over the ray machine with its trumpet that directed the ray at me, high over the heads of the giant Martians, while they still gaped at the spot where I had been. Their brains were too slow and their neck muscles were too slow for them to realize what had happened and turn their heads to follow my movements.

Slowly they turned. Swiftly I landed. I jumped again, not as high this time, but high enough to kick one of the Martians in the head with my metal heel. My back was turned to him as I kicked. I can kick very hard that way. To kick a Martian in the head in the ordinary way hurts my foot more than it does the Martian.

My kicks cannot put men weighing three-quarters of a ton out of action, but their speed and the metal of my shoes does make them painful. The man I had kicked sat down slowly with a groan, and reached for a death-ray.

Slow as he was, and slow as were the others, six of them were reaching for the nerve-stopping deathrays. I had to run for it.

I went through a door and along a dark cavern. The door swung open wide behind me. A beam of light shone into this second room, or cavern. Giants thundered after me.

The door of this cavern was closed. It was closed with one of those heavy Martian bolts that I cannot open. For an instant it looked as though I was trapped. I leaped into the air.

* The height to which I could jump and the speed at which I could run. have always been amazing to the slow, lumbering Martians. My running, climbing and jumping powers are miraculous. How I could open the eyes of my old friends at sport now! Whether my smaller brain is more intelligent than the old I cannot say. I have not noticed much difference. But it seems to work more quickly than the old one. Time is altered, for me. The hands of Winterton's watch, for instance, seem now to take far longer to go round than they did. All living creatures seem to me to have become much bigger and to move far more slowly than once they did.

—Don Hargreaves.

High on the smooth walls I found projections to which I could cling. I leaped to other projections, and to others.

The giants came in, shining their light beams around. It looked hopeless. But they shouted, "He's not in here!" and poured through the second door.

I waited until they had gone, then looked into the first room, where Bommelsmeth was. He had remained behind. He was bending over one of this beloved machines.

I jumped and hid myself on a shelf among the bottles and things. I saw that the machine Bommelsmeth was using was a television set.

"They'll never catch him," Bommelsmeth was saying to himself. "But I know how to get him. I'll get my dummies out of the secret cavern to track him down."

He twirled dials and knobs. Then an idea seemed to strike him suddenly.

"Suppose that Earthling doubled back here!" he said. Striding to the door he threw heavy metal bars across it.

Then back he came to the television machine.

I WAS right behind Bommelsmeth and I could see the screen almost as well as he could. The scene I saw amazed me as much as it did Bommelsmeth. In a smallish cavern an animated dummy with plain metal head marched mechanically around, spreading slaughter. Hurling its spanner, the dummy killed the last man, then took off its metal helmet. It was Vans Holors, disguised. Two other dummies attacked him, but these also Vans Holors destroyed.

I saw other dummies, uncontrolled, smash themselves up. I saw Bommelsmeth reveal himself to Vans. I heard him, gloatingly tell Vans that he was now trapped forever in the little cavern.

Then I leaped at Bommelsmeth from behind. My foot struck the delicate machinery of the television as I went through the air, so Vans saw nothing of the fight.

Bommelsmeth half turned. I caught him a good bang over the right ear with my iron-studded heel. Giving him no time to recover, I leaped and kicked him over the right eye. A hand grabbed at me, but missed.

All this time he had been shouting for help with all the strength of his enormous lungs. I heard answering shouts.

"Come back, you fools," Bommelsmeth roared. "You have let the Earthling slip past you. He's in the control room, all over the place like a jumping cricket." *

I tried to stop him with kicks on the mouth, delivered with my back to him while I turned a somersault in the air. His hands beat the air trying to seize me, but they were very slow. To him, it must have been like fighting a wasp.

Soon a dozen giant Martians were hammering on the door. Bommelsmeth bellowed:

"It's barred! Get a melting ray pistol!"

A Bommelsmeth melting ray, which turns all known substances into gases, would soon cut the door open, I knew. I had to hammer Bommelsmeth unconscious before they got in. But a man who weighs fifteen hundredweight takes a lot of knocking out.

All at once Bommelsmeth fell backward. This unexpected victory took me by surprise. For an instant I could only gape. He had fallen right in the path of the beam from the trumpet of his evolution-hastening machine.

* Bommelsmeth did not, of course, refer to an Earthling cricket, but to a small rodent that is roughly its Martian equivalent.—Ed.

But Bommelsmeth's pretended collapse was only strategy, as I realized an instant later. By feigning unconsciousness, he checked my attack for a moment, and was able to reach a deathray box that rested on a seat.

As I leaped over his head to avoid the deadly ray, I secretly kicked the switch that set the evolution-speeding ray in motion. Yes, I let him have the chromosomes of his own body cells mucked about with, as he had mucked about with those of so many other people. So busy was he trying to get me with his ray that he did not even notice the yellow light, his own danger signal.

For a minute or so he flashed his ray about while I jumped. It was something like a man slashing at a gnat with a walking-stick. In the end, of course, he was bound to get me. But his strokes slowed up. The raybox fell from his hands.

Then I was able to look at him. Bommelsmeth was evolving fast. He was rushing down one of the queer side turnings that branch off the main path of evolutionary progress. His skin was growing a coat of smooth, shiny black fur, his hands and feet were changing into flippers.

But I had no time to watch the progress of Bommelsmeth. The melting-ray was in action. The metal bar had been cut through. Another second and the door would open.

CHAPTER VII

Return

TO silence Bommelsmeth, I switched his death-ray to half strength so that it would only produce unconsciousness, and let him have it. The half-developed creature fell in an ungainly attitude.

Then I looked for hiding. Time was short. I snatched the trumpet-shaped funnel off the evolution-speeding machine. I turned it upside-down and hid under it. Like a candle under an old fashioned extinguisher. The evolution ray, no longer confined and directed by the funnel, filled the whole cavern. I, alone, was shielded from it.

The door crashed open. I heard many Martians come in. I heard their puzzled cries.

"The place is empty!"

"Where's the chief?"

"Where's the Earthling?"

"What's that black thing on the floor?"

Then someone shouting,

"The Earthling must be hiding somewhere. Shut the door so that he can't get out, and hunt till you find him."

I heard things being turned over. Presently came strange cries.

"What's the matter? What's happening?"

I took a cautious peep out. The Martian nearest the evolution machine had developed long ears, horns and a tail. And all the others were changing at a speed that was beyond all belief, into creatures more fantastic than any science-fiction artist ever dreamed of. Half cat, half fish, half horse, half crab, half spider, half bird. But I am no artist, and can never convey to you the incredible nightmare of shapes that resulted from evolution, after its sleep of ages, being suddenly kicked into action.

With one impulse all these queer creatures made for the door and rushed away; galloping, leaping, crawling, gliding, flying. I came out from under my extinguisher turned off the ray.

Bommelsmeth was still there unconscious. He had now changed completely into some amphibious creature that I can describe only by saying that it was something like a sea-lion.

Bommelsmeth, the mighty Bommel-

smeth, who once held all Mars in such terror as had never before been known on either of the twin worlds, turned into a sea-lion!

Suddenly I remembered Vans Holors. It took me only a few minutes to contact Vans. The television had already been adjusted to the correct spot by Bommelsmeth, otherwise I might have hunted forever without finding that one little cavern in the heart of a great rock.

VANS was sitting there looking pretty dejected, but brightened at the sight of me. I told my story hastily, and he told his.

"Don, boy," he said, "we've beaten Bommelsmeth, but we're both in a jam."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean I can't get out of here. You can't get out of there where you are."

"How come?"

"Can you find your way across the surface of Mars to the cavern you came out of?"

That was a new thought to me.

"No, I can't," I said presently, not feeling quite so bright.

"And another thing, Don," he went on. "There is a price on your head. You are an outlaw. I have been listening to the radio-television broadcast."

He explained how I had been accused of the attempted assassination of Princess Wimpolo.

"That is awkward, Vans," I said. "What am I to do?"

"Go back to Earth, Don," he said earnestly. "You can do it now. You have a hermetically-sealed travel-sphere. Your blood krypton has been removed by Bommelsmeth. You could soon find the mines of your old mining company where your Earth friends are. Go back to Earth, Don. Leave us Martians to solve our own problems."

I thought for a minute.

"No, Vans," I said. "I cannot leave Princess Wimpolo. I cannot leave you to die miserably in that cavern. I cannot leave all the Earthlings in Mars imprisoned at Usulor's orders. I've got to get you out, and I've got to prove my own innocence."

"But how, Don?"

"Be quiet, Vans. Let me think."

"Vans," I said presently, "to prove that I did not attempt the assassination of Wimpolo, we must produce the real culprit. We must produce the dummy made to represent me. Was it ever found?"

"No, it was never found," said Vans.

"That dummy was just about my old weight and strength," I mused. "What would I do if a lot of big dummies were hunting me? I would climb, Vans, look up. Is my dummy anywhere above you on the rocks?"

Vans turned a searchlight beam upwards, then gave a shout.

"Why, yes. It is sitting in a crevice in the rocks. It must have reached it when its stored power gave out."

"Good. Now, Vans, make a great pile of seaweed so that it falls without breaking itself. Get a melting ray and cut away the rocky ledge it sits on."

In a few minutes the dummy was down.

Bommelsmeth, or the sea-lion that had been Bommelsmeth, had opened his eyes and was staring at me mournfully. I had chained him to the wall, and also I held in my hand one of his own melting-ray pistols in case of accidents. He seemed still able to understand what Vans and I were talking about.

UNDER my directions Vans repaired the dummy, emptied out what water had not drained out, and got it watertight.

"Capital!" I said. "Now you have a dummy that can haul you through the

watery caverns to safety."

"One moment," said Vans. "Not so fast! Who is going to sit at the switchboard here and direct the dummy while it is hauling me to safety?"

"Wuff! Wuff! Wuff!" barked the sea-lion. I'll swear it was laughing.

"Never mind, Vans," I said. "Get the dummy going. Send it out. Use it to tell our friends where we are!"

"Attaboy!" murmured Vans, getting busy.

Very soon I was sharing Vans' view of what the dummy saw relayed by its radio television eyes. In a few moments the thing was swimming ashore near Usulor's royal palace. People saw it, shouted, "Don, the outlaw!"

Nerve-stopping death-rays were aimed at it, but naturally the dummy was unharmed. It went on. Guards rushed at it, but it leaped over their heads and still went on. Up the wall of the palace it climbed as a squirrel runs up the trunk of a tree. It reached the Princess' apartment.

"Princess Wimpolo!" it called. "Princess Wimpolo! I can explain everything."

Wimpolo came through a doorway, just as the dummy got through the window.

"Don!" she cried. "Take care! My father—"

Just then a guard who had hidden himself behind some curtains jumped out and swung a heavy sword. Vans was a fraction of an instant too slow in seeing it. The sword, like a great ax, crashed through the head of the dummy, putting it out of action forever.

The guard thought he was saving the Princess from a second attempt at assassination.

"Seems we get no luck, Vans," I said gloomily.

"Wuff! Wuff!" barked the sea-lion.

"Be quiet," I said.

Vans was watching in the television.

"Don," he said, "your sea-lion wants to talk to you."

"Wuff! Wuff!" barked the sea-lion, nodding harder than ever. "Wuff! Wuff! Wuff! Wuff!"

"Don!" cried Vans, dancing with excitement. "It's answering you! It's telling you it can help! Oh, give it a trial!"

"Wuff!" said the sea-lion, pleadingly.

"All right, then," I said. "Come."

I didn't like the idea of trusting that creature. So I said to it, "Now, see, I'm taking your evolution ray machine with me. Rescue us, and I'll change you back into a man again. Fail us, and you stay a sea-lion forever. Get me?"

He nodded.

The sea-lion led the way to the airtight traffic sphere. In no time at all we had shot across the plain, sea-lion steering, and shot down into the other cavern. The sea-lion drove with sickening recklessness. In a few minutes we were beside the still sea. The sea-lion slithered over the rocks and dived, as such creatures do, like a stone.

A MINUTE passed, two minutes, five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes. At last it returned with Vans in its mouth. Vans was almost unconscious despite his Martian swimming powers, but needed nothing but a rest to regain his full strength.

"Now," I said to the sea-lion, "I'll keep my promise. I'll turn you back into a man again."

Not that I felt too sure of myself. Bommelsmeth back again might be a problem. But I had promised. I put the indicator into reverse, set the machine going.

The sea-lion shuffled hastily out of

the way, wuffing. I turned the machine round. Again it shuffled out of the way.

"It doesn't want to be turned back," Vans cried.

Then I understood. There was no certainty that the changeback would be successful. Bommelsmeth knew what strong medicine his ray was, and the wild results it was likely to produce. Safer to remain a sea-lion.

"As you like it," I said. And he is still my pet sea-lion.

We drove to the palace. Vans got out. I remained inside, out of sight.

"Vans," shouted the guards in delight. "Enter! High honor awaits you for saving the Princess!"

"What is this?" asked Vans pointing to a notice offering the huge reward for my body, dead or alive.

"Oh, forget that!" said the Captain of the Guard. "That's cancelled. It wasn't Don that attacked the Princess. It was an animated dummy. That same dummy came back and had another try, but one of the guards caught it. The Princess thought she had seen Don killed before her eyes until all the wires and wheels and valves fell out. Don is pardoned, and all the Earthlings are free."

At that I jumped out of the sphere. A great shout went up. People poured out of the palace.

"Vans," I whispered, "take care of the evolution ray and get it well out of sight. It's not safe to leave it about and these people will keep me busy."

VANS picked up the box and went off. He raced for his own home. As he rushed into the front garden another figure might have been seen slipping out the back in a hurry.

Vans looked eagerly around. His eyes sought out the slim figure of Olla his wife.

"Olla," he roared, thundering toward her. "I've come back! Your Vans is back!"

Then he stopped short. She stood glaring up at him.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" she demanded furiously.

He gaped.

"You nearly left me a widow," she stormed, "just to save her. You think more of her than you do me!"

"But, Olla, love, I—"

A stinging slap on the cheek stopped him. She couldn't hurt the strongest man in Mars physically, but she did hurt his feelings.

"Olla!" he protested.

"Leave me," she ordered. Then he saw the big box he had been carrying. "What's that?" she demanded.

"I don't know," he said, "but you mustn't touch it. It's dangerous."

Olla snorted. The big bear trying to order *her* about! She went straight to the box and fiddled with the knobs.

"Olla! Don't! It's dangerous."

"Stuff," she said. "It's a new television set. Stop your squawks and tell me how to work it."

Vans was in distress. He couldn't manhandle Olla.

"Don," he called, rushing out. "Come! I need you."

When I got there a large red and yellow bird, something like a flamingo, stood full in the glare of the evolution ray, making strange noises and flapping its wings in puzzlement. All at once it flew up in the air clumsily and vanished in the distance.

"Olla!" moaned Vans.

He rushed off.

Five minutes later a small airplane roared over my head at a considerable speed. Vans Holors had gone to find his wife.

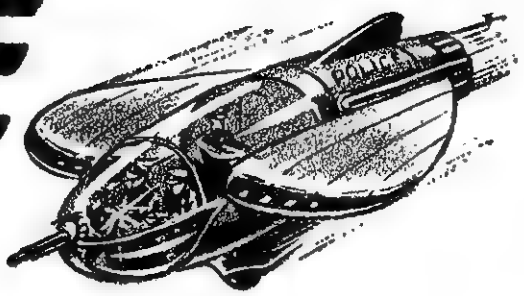
Up to the moment of writing he has not been heard from.—*Don Hargreaves.*

"Rebel!" she cried. "Throw off the tyrants who rule us from Science Tower!"

SALE

by

ALFRED BESTER



Life For Sale, Inc. had exactly that to sell. And they sold it—because even if air is free, you've got to breath it . . .

"FOR the love of mud, are you going to let a pack of women make you jittery?" laughed Guthry Wilder, Chief of Scienticity. He grinned at the other Department Heads gathered in the Broadcasting studio. "You're all as jumpy as a flea circus with the itch."

"It's not a case of jitters," protested Billy Freeman, "I'm only throwing out an idea for what it's worth. I just said I was worried about two hundred Heliocopters hanging ten thousand feet overhead all morning . . . And now Fray Gilbert's speech . . ."

"Them Helios are probably an advertising stunt," grunted Jinx Cauldwell. He was tall and indolent, but his speech had a caustic quality. It seemed to enrage Billy Freeman.

"Yeah?" he said. "Well, listen to this." He went to the control board and snapped a switch.

Instantly the great viso-screen took life. They saw the tiny figure of a girl gesticulating on a platform. Below her,

dressed in the red and blue uniforms of the Suffragette Party, hordes of women screamed and waved white-flashing arms.

". . . This is the twenty-first century," cried Fray Gilbert in a bell-clear voice. "This is Scienticity, the scientific center of the world. Here, we women work side by side with the men. We work as hard and as well; and yet we're excluded from the Governing Board of the City. The women of all other cities throughout the world have the vote . . . but not us . . ."

"Funny," laughed Guth Wilder, "how a principle can make an idiot out of a gal. No offense, Steve."

"I can take it," groaned Steve Emory, Chief of Physiology. "If I'd known Fray was going to start this foolishness, I'd never have started dating her."

Guth Wilder paced to the window of the Broadcasting Control room. Below them, on the broad green lawn before the building, was the Suffragette Demonstration that was being broadcast. Guth thrust open the crystal window and listened to the cacophony that drifted up through the warm afternoon air. Fray Gilbert's voice sounded clearly. Her words from the studio "mike" called like an echo.

"We demand proportional representation," she cried. "This is not the dark age. We are all Scienticitizens; we have as many rights as men. I tell you, unless we are granted the vote, we shall have to take matters in our own hands!"

A scream of approval went up.

"You hear that?" demanded Billy Freeman. He pointed overhead. "You see those white Helios? Drifting up there all morning. Why? I'll tell you. This Gilbert woman is organizing a putsch. Those Helios are waiting up there for a signal. When Fray Gilbert says the words, they'll come swooping down and let hell break loose!"

"Ridiculous!" snorted Steve Emory. "You fellows don't know Fray. She may get excited about an ideal, but she'd never do anything like that."

"No . . . Wait a minute." Guth stared down at the demonstration and then up at the Helios soaring like specks of silver. "Maybe Billy isn't so wrong. You better cut her off, son. Let her finish her speech, but don't broadcast any more."

"I knew you'd see light!" exclaimed Billy Freeman. He dashed to the control panel and began throwing switches. The image on the viso-screen faded. The voice was chopped off. Through the studio windows they could hear it continue.

"This is silly," complained Emory. "Fray will be furious when she finds out."

"Maybe not so silly," drawled Jinx Cauldwell. "Seems to me Guth usually has an A-1 hunch for the things he does."

"It's only a hunch," admitted Guth. He looked around at the Department Chiefs who had gathered in the Studio. A dozen young men, the cream of the world's scientific talent. It gave him a feeling of security to know they were behind him, ready to back up any one of his hunches. The responsibility of directing Scienticity lay heavy on his own young shoulders.

THROUGH the broad open window of the Studio came the dull clamour of a mob. The shrills of women's voices punctuated by men's shouts. Fray Gilbert had ceased speaking.

The Department Chiefs glanced curiously at each other, then moved to the window to look out again, their light metal-fabric tunics rustling. The Broadcasting Studio was set in a small park,

and from the window the men could easily examine the tree studded lawn below them.

They stared, then shouted with laughter. A small parade had formed and was marching around the Studio. A parade of women, in ragged ranks, all carrying the red and blue banners of the Suffragette Party. They sang snatches of their party anthem and were screaming excitedly. Banners read: WE WANT TO VOTE and DOWN WITH MEN and NO REPRESENTATION, NO PRODUCTION. But most ridiculous of all, the women had stripped off their clothes and were marching stark naked!

Crowds of jeering men lined the sidewalks around the park and gaped. The guards before the Studio gates had left their posts for a better look, and were nearly doubled up with laughter. The afternoon sun filtered through the towering buildings and glinted on the nude bodies. From far to the east came the faint howls of police sirens.

"And that," laughed Guth Wilder, "is what wants to vote. These are the women who want to sit at the Governing Board with us."

"The more I look," grinned Billy Freeman, "the more I'm inclined to like the idea."

The park packed solidly with human flesh, the women still trying to march, the bystanders crowding around, yelling and guffawing. It was the most unprecedented mob scene that had yet taken place since the turn of the twenty-first century. As the police drove up and knifed their way through the jammed thousands, the lawn turned into a roiling mass of confusion.

The Department Chiefs of Scienticity leaned far out to watch the fun, and only dimly through the confusion did they hear a woman's voice behind them. Curt and incisive.

"Turn around!"

As he withdrew his head from the window, Guth Wilder was only vaguely conscious of the interruption. He turned easily and saw the others of his staff yanking in their heads. Then he started as he realized that the Studio had filled up with women. They were drawn up, ten of them, before the broad instrument-lined wall, all in the smart red blouses and blue shorts of the Suffragette Party. A little before them stood a tall girl.

She had flaming red hair and fierce green eyes, and her full mouth was drawn into a severe line. Her legs were long and straight and under the light blouse, Guth could see the trembling rise and fall of her high breasts. But the gleaming Chron-gun in her hand was a little too real, and it looked like a cannon in her long fingers as she advanced slowly.

"Sit down," she said. She motioned the gun at the others.

WILDER eased his big frame into a crystal chair and nodded to his men. Then, for a few minutes, there was no sound in the large office but the echo of shouts and screams from the park.

"Very nice," said Wilder at length. "Is this a social call?"

"In heaven's name, Fray!" cried Steve Emory, "are you out of your mind?"

"The name," she said acidly to Emory, "is *Miss* Gilbert . . . and this happens to be a business call." She turned to Guth. "Now listen to me, Mister Wilder and all the rest of you fatuous, conceited Governors. I expected at least the right of free speech and fair play from you."

"Now, now," soothed Guth. He didn't like the looks of those Chron-Guns. One little blast could paralyze

a man for keeps.

"I knew you cut off my broadcast within a minute," snapped Fray Gilbert. "I had aides listening in waiting for just such a dirty trick . . . and I had that parade of mine outside organized to take care of such an emergency. In the past you've laughed at our demand for a vote in Scienticity affairs. I think my ruse for breaking into the Broadcasting Studios may twist that laugh to the other side of your face."

"Very adroit," nodded Guth. "You attracted the attention of the guards in front of the gate with that mass strip-tease and slipped in unnoticed." Rapidly he calculated the odds. There were twelve men to eleven women. Easy enough but for the fact that they were strapping gals who seemed to know how to handle their Chron-guns.

"Please, Fray," broke in Emory. "Can't we talk this over reasonably. You're letting yourself in for an awful mess . . ."

"Shut up, Steve. Now . . . we don't like you, Mister Wilder," she continued in flat tones. "We've worked in the labs of Scienticity just as hard as the men. When we've asked for a vote in the city affairs you've brushed us aside as though we don't count."

Guth laughed.

"And now you're going to show me that you do count," he said. "Look, Miss Gilbert, you're too pretty to talk politics behind a gun. Why get so excited? It's not really that important, is it?"

"Let's understand each other," returned Fray icily. "We're serious about this. We intend to take matters in our own hands. Even if it means bloodshed and violence."

"What did I tell you!" exclaimed Billy Freeman. "Those damned white Helios floating around up there . . ."

"Shut up, Billy!" snapped Guth. He arose despite the menace of the gun. "Well, Miss Gilbert, what's on your mind? A slight case of murder?"

"A slight case of Broadcast," she returned. "I'm going on the air again, here in this studio, and I'm going to finish my speech. If t h a t doesn't awaken Scienticity to the glaring injustice, I'm prepared to take more urgent measures."

"Ah," smiled Guth. He motioned to his staff. "All of us are Department Chiefs and comprise the Board of Governors. You wouldn't intend to use us as the price of women's suffrage, would you?"

"If you make it necessary," answered Fray grimly. She waved the Chron-gun at Billy Freeman, Chief of Radio. "And now, Mister Freeman, if you will tell your crew to prepare a studio for me . . ."

Her Chron-gun blasted as Wilder leaped forward. The blast whistled over his shoulder. He shouted and caught the girl's arm, yanking her against his chest. Billy Freeman, lightning-fast, had already plunged forward and tackled one of the Suffragettes. There were high shrill cries as the other men rushed. Then the Chron-guns roared.

GUTH thought he had tangled with a wildcat. She lashed her arm free and whipped the heavy gun across his temple, but as he slumped, he dragged her down to the smooth steel floor with him.

He managed to look around. Case Conway, the Metabolism Chief, was floundering alongside the control panel, clutching a gory shoulder. Over against the viso-screen, his staff had closed with the Suffragettes and were struggling to take the Chron-guns from the clawing girls.

"Lie still," hissed Guth, "and I won't hurt you!"

His arm around the girl's waist crushed her against him. He could feel the hard young muscles writhe as she punched at him with her free hand. He shook her wrist once, so savagely that the gun flew from her fingers and clattered across the floor. Then he gazed down at her vivid features.

Suddenly Guth forgot that he was a Lord of Scienticity, one of the rulers of a million scientists. He forgot that this was the girl whom Steve Emory had been rushing for almost six months. He could only think that he was thirty years old and had never before been so close to a lovely spit-fire; that he was thirty years old and had never had time enough to fall in love.

"Be quiet," grinned Guthry Wilder. "This won't hurt."

He bent his head and kissed her.

And at that moment he nearly died. His heart paused . . . clutched and stuttered. His breath stopped and his frame was wracked with an agonizing palsy. He was conscious of blackness before his eyes and a roaring in his ears . . . as though he were drowning.

He took a breath, and another, his heart pounding under the strain. There was something horribly wrong with his lungs. They had forgotten how to work. They would only fill with air when he remembered to inhale.

The fighting in the Broadcasting Studio had stopped. Guth looked around wildly and saw that the others too were gasping spasmodically, a look of terror on their faces. Outside, the streets were silent.

Pumping his lungs laboriously, Guth got to his feet. He walked toward the Studio window and never realized he progressed across the slick steel floor like a crooked, deformed thing with hunched back and twisted spine. All he knew was that the lawn and streets before the Broadcasting Building were cluttered with spasmodically jerking humans, crawling on the ground.

He almost fell from the window-sill before he remembered to pump his lungs and drive back the sick, dizzy blackness that had swept over him. He thought: God in Heaven! Respiration has suddenly become a voluntary function. If you don't remember to breathe, you don't . . . and you suffocate. My lungs won't inhale unless I consciously direct them . . . like working my arms and legs. What's happened to us?

IT was, thought Guth, like learning to live. He crouched over the window and tried to draw breath regularly. His diaphragm felt like a new muscle. No, not a new one; an old one that he was just learning to use. The way a man, long bed-ridden, has to learn how to walk all over again.

He crawled to where Fray Gilbert lay. Her eyes were open and he could see the strained pulse throbbing in her neck. Her breasts heaved.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"I don't know," answered Guth. "Don't talk now . . ."

He made the rounds of the Studio. Case Conway was dead. He'd probably fainted from the wound in his shoulder. An unconscious man couldn't remember to breathe. And there was a blonde girl with bangs and astonished brown eyes, her mouth in an Oh of amazement. But she too must have forgotten to pump her lungs until suffocation caught her and made it too late to remember.

The others nodded faintly to Guth. He crawled back to a chair and yanked himself upright.

"Listen, people," he said. "I don't know what's hit us. I do know that the lung muscles have turned from involuntary to voluntary functions. You've *got* to remember to breathe.

If you fail you may faint away from suffocation. Then it's sure death. Remember to breathe."

They nodded. Billy Freeman struggled to his feet and began helping the others up. Every few minutes he reeled dizzily, clutching at his side. Pearls of sweat showed on his chalk-white face.

"There's no sense just staying here and gasping," continued Guth. "As Chiefs and Governors of Scienticity, we should be the first to analyze and find a solution. If this plague has struck all of Scienticity, it means that world communications have broken down . . . everything will be disorganized. Scienticity is the brain and heart of the Earth. We've got to act fast."

They were all on their feet when he finished, but as they groped toward the door, they heard the roar of Helio engines come swooping down out of the skies.

"The white helios," gasped Billy Freeman. He lurched toward the window.

Guth followed him and stared up. Drifting a few hundred feet overhead, twisting and floating through the skyscraper heads, was a glittering white Heliocopter. Through the buildings they could see scores more, sailing over the city.

"Look there!" exclaimed Guth. He pointed.

On the gleaming white metal body of the Helio above them, black letters stood in relief. Slowly they spelled them out. LIFE FOR SALE, INC. And at that moment, there was a cough and a blare of giant loudspeakers, and an enormous metallic voice blasted out, speaking to the limp Scienticitizens who stared up from below.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" roared the voice. "This horrible plague that has crushed our city can be cured. It is a new disease, never before known to science, but already a cure has been discovered. If you want to return to normality. If you want to breathe again. If you want to be able to sleep and eat and work without fear of death . . . go to a White Helio and ask for The Cure. Go to a White Helio and ask for The Cure . . ."

The voice blasted on, repeating the message. In the distance they could hear the faint mechanical rasp of other speakers.

"The Cure," echoed Billy Freeman. "I think I begin to get the idea . . ." He doubled over suddenly and began to cough. Red froth appeared on his lips.

"Do you?" said Guth. "Come on. Let's see what this is all about."

THE streets looked like slow motion pictures. Hundreds crawled along, hands pressed to their sides. At every moment a body would crumple to the ground, either to add to the thousands that were already limp, or shake a while and at last rise again. There were few voices . . . only whispers.

Gravi-cars were piled up in little clumps along the driveways, their occupants sprawled motionless within. Overhead gyros hung aimlessly, their pilots crumpled over the controls. But the planes in the higher altitudes flew with purpose, frantically, like birds whose nests had been destroyed. Every so often one would swoop low, then suddenly hang in mid-air as its pilot abruptly stiffened upright and collapsed.

There was a line a quarter of a mile long before the White Helio they found, but the Blazon of the Governing Board on their tunics gave them immediate preference. Guth entered the ship, half supporting Fray Gilbert, with Steve

Emory at her other side.

The cabin was twelve feet square and absolutely bare but for a long rack of cases, a small stool and an enormous sterilizer. The clerk, a small man in white smock, was guarded by half-a-dozen muscular men, carrying heavy Chron-guns. They wore strange chain-metal tunics and caps, and around their necks were steel collars lettered: L.F.S.

The clerk lifted the lid of the sterilizer and brought out a rack of hypo needles. He unlocked a case and selected a handful of ampules. As he nipped off the sealed tips and placed them in the syringes, a thug beside a safe in the corner of the cabin called to them.

"Dollar a shot," he said. "You pay as you go."

Guth threw him a handful of bills and seated Fray on the stool. The injection was made and her arm swiftly swabbed with iodine.

"Twenty hours' immunity," said the clerk briskly. "Come back tomorrow. Next?"

The antidote "took" almost immediately. Guth was relieved to see Fray smile and relax. It seemed like a million years before all the women were injected, and finally his staff. Guth waited until all were through, and at last took his treatment. The injection ran through his veins like liquid fire. He was tingling when he stepped outside the cabin to find his staff waiting for him. The Suffragettes had disappeared.

"And a good thing, too," said Billy Freeman. "We've got plenty work ahead of us."

"It's a beautiful idea," said Guth reflectively. It was an incredible relief to be able to walk and talk without devoting the entire consciousness toward respiration. "Yes . . . a beautiful idea. I'd like to meet the black dog who thought of it. Life for sale! Force people to buy what they've always taken for granted. The whole thing was planned, of course. Poison our respiration centers and then provide a temporary cure at a dollar a shot. Probably all his clerks and assistants were immunized way in advance. What a fortune that heel is going to make before we catch up with him!"

"A dollar a shot," drawled Jinx Cauldwell. "Ten million people in Scienticity. Ten million dollars a day . . ."

"We don't know if it's all Scienticity," interrupted Guth. "That's one of the things we'll have to discover. It may show just how we've been poisoned. What in blazes could hit so many people at the same time? I've a hunch it's gas. Did you notice that Helios were immune until they dropped too low?"

THEY reached the Central Administration Building, in the little park adjoining the Broadcasting Studios. There were located the score of offices occupied by the various Departmental Chiefs of Scienticity. The streets and park were deserted, except for the horribly still bodies sleeping on the pavement and grass. It reminded Guth of Case Conway, lying upstairs in the television Studio.

"Damn it!" gritted Guth, "it's just mass murder!"

He vaulted up the broad marble steps in a white fury, his staff hurrying behind him, and burst into his large, book-lined office. It was only after three furious steps that he saw a man lounging easily behind the big square desk. A man in chain metal with a collar around his neck.

"Good evening," smiled the man. "I've been waiting for you." He had a swarthy face and a thin jet moustache.

"Get to hell out of here," said Guth softly, "before I tear you apart."

"Temper! Temper!" admonished the swarthy man. "I have a message for you from The Salesman."

"The Salesman!" Guth laughed harshly. "Salesman of what?"

"Just now . . . Life," answered the suave man. He adjusted his collar elaborately. "But it'll be death unless you follow orders. The Salesman commands you to disband the Governing Council of Scienticity at once!"

"Get out of here," Guth said evenly. He stepped forward. The swarthy man jumped out of the chair and slipped away from Guth's outstretched hand.

"Those are the orders," he repeated. "All science, all research must stop at once. All Department Chiefs must retire and await further information. You can obey orders . . . or take the consequences." He began to saunter out.

"Wait a moment," said Steve Emory. "What's it worth to you to sell out?"

"Betray The Salesman?" laughed the swarthy man. "It's not safe." Nevertheless he hesitated.

"Here's our price!" broke in Guth. He dug his fingers into the metal collar and lifted the man wriggling into the air. One quick stride brought him to the head of the stairs. He swung the emissary clattering down the flight, turned on his heel and re-entered his office, dusting his hands. The heavy metal door slammed on the last of the fall.

"That was silly, Guth," protested Emory. "He might have helped if we'd handled him right."

"No, Steve. If he'd sell out one side, he'd betray the other. We'd just be wasting time and money, and taking chances. Now look, fellows, this is our job for right now. Steve, I want you to check on the extent of the plague. Jinx, get all the data you can on the infection itself. Billy . . . Where the hell has Billy Freeman gone to?"

They looked around.

"No matter," grumbled Guth. "He's probably romancing one of those Suffragettes. I'll do the job myself."

THEY scattered for work. Guth plugged in the telecaster and dialed feverishly. He thanked heaven that the teley used the automatic system. As his calls came through and he spoke for a few minutes with the Scienticity Police Commissioner and other officials, his face darkened and he began swearing sulphurously under his breath.

Steve Emory and Jinx Cauldwell came back at last with their reports. The infection had covered a ten-mile area and was spreading slowly. It reached an altitude of about six hundred feet. It seemed to be a gas. Jinx could only add that it might be a nitrogen compound.

"I haven't had time for a complete analysis," he said. "There's an eighty per cent nitrogen content in the air sample I took, and that's way too high. But you've got to give me at least five hours more . . ."

"You won't get 'em," retorted Guth. "And we won't be able to find out how this gas hits us, either. I've just contacted all the city officials. The Salesman sent his gentle warnings to them, too, and they're in a blue funk. It looks as though Life For Sale, Inc., is really going to take over."

There was a buzz at the teley, and Guth jumped. He took the call, to discover Billy Freeman's excited face on the screen.

"Billy!" he exploded. "What the hell?"

"Listen," whispered Billy, "I've got to talk fast. I tailed that guy in the trick moustache back to his headquarters. There isn't much time, because I

think they're tailing me now. Look, Guth, the closer you get to the headquarters, the more you sniff a powerful stink of ammonia. I think this is a gas infection."

"We figured that ourselves," interrupted Guth. "Maybe a nitrogen compound being released. Ammonia may be one of the by-products of manufacture. You found out their plant?"

"Yeh . . ." Billy glanced around hurriedly. To one side of him they could see the glint of the glass booth door. "It's in the headquarters, I think. The Central Building, right opposite the old Central Park Weather Tower. Make it quick, Guth. I'll wait here for you. And look, if it's a gas, why don't you dig up some gas masks?"

He cut off.

"Gas masks!" exclaimed Guth. "Where in blazes does he suppose we're going to get them?"

"Museum," answered Frosty Adamson. "On the way up, we can drop in at the Museum of Antiquities. They have a hundred there, all in good shape. We can pick up Chron-guns too."

"Spoken like an Archaeologist oughta," drawled Jinx Cauldwell. "Let's go."

They hustled out of the Administration Building and drove swiftly uptown to the Museum of Antiquities on the site of the old Metropolitan Muesum of Art. There, Frosty Adamson dug into the archives and emerged with a dozen masks of glass and fabric, relics of World War VII, fifty years ago.

"Damned peculiar," grunted Adamson as he handed around the masks and procured Chron-guns from the arsenal. "I could have sworn there were at least a hundred masks here, last time I looked. These are all I could find."

"No matter," answered Guth. "We'll find the answers later. Just now we've got to get west to the Central Building!"

They walked unobtrusively through the streets. It was getting dark and there were deep shadows. The city seemed paralyzed from the shock and horror, and the only figures that could be seen were the sanitary squads belatedly removing the last few inert forms.

They paused before the Central Building and lurked behind an Underground kiosk. The Central was a small, round structure of steel and cobalt. It was only ten stories high, and the middle floors bulged outward so that the structure had a barrel-like appearance. Just to the right was the Old Weather Tower that Billy had mentioned, perched high up on the one fragment of rock left as a relic of ancient Central Park. There was no sign of Billy. No sign of guards near the Central.

FORMING a rough phalanx with Guth at the apex, they prepared to advance.

"Just keep moving straight ahead," whispered Guth, "as though we've come for a talk. Don't start shooting the place down until they fire."

They walked forward. As they neared the Central Building Guth tried to restrain himself from running. It was a naked feeling, walking slowly and waiting for a shot to come ripping out of that silent building . . . out of anywhere.

But there were only about twenty paces more to reach the bleak-looking, empty entrance. It looked like a mousetrap. Now only eighteen to go . . . sixteen . . .

The attack swooped down on their flanks with whirlwind silence and efficiency. One moment they were walking across an empty avenue toward an empty building, the next, a wall of figures had swept down on them from

either side.

No one had time to say anything. Guth whipped up his Chron-gun and leveled it at a flashing form. Before he could press the firing stud, a tiny pencil of radiation pointed its bright finger at him and pricked his shoulder.

Waves of coma swept around his body from that prick, enfolding him like a hot, moist sheet. As he relaxed into black velvet unconsciousness, his dimming eyes discerned the dull glints of red and blue . . .

"GET up," said Fray Gilbert sharply. "You've lain there like swine all night." She kicked Guth's ribs.

He rolled over and opened his eyes painfully. Fray seemed to tower over him, miles high. Still clad in the red blouse and blue shorts of the Suffragettes, she fingered a compact glass and fabric gas mask that hung at her neck. Guth eyed it for a moment.

"Nice work," he said slowly. "You wouldn't be The Salesman of Death, would you?"

"Don't be a fool!" She shook her head impatiently and looked around at the others. Guth followed her gaze. He and his men were lying on a dozen low cots in what appeared to be a dormitory of sorts. Small, deep-set windows high up in the walls let in shafts of nacreous morning sun. The others of his staff groaned softly as they thrashed awake.

"I'd like to know what you dropped us with," said Guth mildly, attempting to conceal the anger that raged just under the surface. "Something new, isn't it."

"Good and new!" mumbled Jinx Cauldwell, rubbing his forehead slowly.

"Yes," said Fray. A smile touched the corners of her full mouth. "Something I developed to take care of the Governors of Scienticity . . . In case Chron-guns proved inadequate. A neuron ray. It sets up a short circuit between nerve filament and sheath through the length of the body."

"Not bad at all. And now would you mind telling us why you butted in just when you did? I suppose you realize we were about to liquidate Life For Sale? Or did I understand you to say you were The Salesman?"

"I told you not to be a fool!" flared Fray.

"You've been the fool," roared Guth, all self control suddenly gone, "and I'd like to beat some sense into your stubborn red head. You might have joined forces with us instead of sneaking off and knifing us in the back."

"Atababy, Guth," jeered Jinx Cauldwell. "Show her who wears the pants in this city."

Fray slipped a small silver pencil from her belt and displayed it.

"If I hear another word," she said furiously, "I'll drop you all again and let you sleep past injection time. Ever try to breathe consciously while you're unconscious?"

That sobered them.

"NOW," she continued a little more calmly. "I just want you to know, Mr. Wilder, that I'm not in league with Life For Sale, but I happen to be able to see more than an inch in front of my nose. I could join forces with you, but I'm aware that once the major menace is gone, you'd be quite capable of betraying me. I'd rather have you out of the way first before I crack this Life For Sale. Then I'll be sure that the aims of the Suffragette Party will be fulfilled when sanity is restored."

"That is," said Guth, "assuming that you'll be capable of cracking Life For Sale."

"Men are so superior," laughed Fray. "They'll never admit a woman can do something as well, if not better than

they. We trailed your Mister Freeman, intercepted his message, beat you to the Museum and left just enough gas masks to enable you to walk into our trap. If we can handle our Lords and Masters, the Gods of the Governing Council, so easily . . . we can deal with Life For Sale."

"What did you do with Freeman?" demanded Guth.

"He slipped away somehow . . . but," Fray dismissed the matter airily, "he'll be picked up again before long. Just now we have more important business at hand than to waste time with you."

"I'll say it's important," retorted Guth grimly. "Every moment of our time and yours that you've wasted means that much more for The Salesman to prepare for us. You're clever . . . yes, as clever as the mongrel that steals a bone the bigger dogs are fighting for."

"Quiet," shouted Fray.

"And that's typical of all you women," continued Guth savagely. He got to his feet and walked up to her deliberately. "You want to know why I've refused to give you a vote? I'll tell you. Because you women meddle, you confuse the issues, you're smugly proud of your strength when you knife a fighting man in the back. You haven't the guts to fight fairly nor the integrity to admit defeat. You're not fighters . . . you're scavengers picking at leftovers. *Now*, go ahead and shoot, damn your red-headed stupidity!"

She raised the pencil, speechless with rage, met Guth's furious eyes for a moment, and at last dashed out of the room. The door slammed and locked behind her.

"Nice work!" drawled Jinx Cauldwell.

"Couldn't have done better myself," grinned Frosty Adamson.

"Ditto!" called Billy Freeman.

"Billy!" Guth jumped and stared around. "Where in blazes are you, man?"

"At the window. Steve Emory's here too. We caught that speech. It was beautiful!"

BILLY Freeman punctuated his words with little heaves that slid his slender frame through the high narrow window. As he lowered himself and dropped the last few feet, they saw Steve Emory crawl around a huge stone cornice and begin to squirm in.

"This is an old place, full of roccoco," grinned Billy as he shook hands all around. "Used to be some kind of girls' school overlooking the Hudson. It's cluttered with stone carvings. Steve and I had a cinch climbing up. Those stupid gals never thought of placing a guard on the roof."

"How'd you get away? What happened?"

"I was waiting for you just under the Weather Tower," explained Billy. "The first thing I knew there were you all coming across the avenue and a mob of Suffragettes between us. I skirted around to get to you from the rear and I heard pops and met Steve running like hell . . ."

"They missed me in the gloom," explained Emory.

"After they had you down," continued Billy, "they split up into two groups. One group picked you up and I followed them here. Steve followed the other gang. We arranged to meet at the Administration Building this morning."

"How about your gang, Steve," asked Guth. "What'd they do?"

"Nothing," grinned Emory. "Just like women. My gang just wandered around. Any fool could see they were trying to mislead shadowers. So I

scouted around the Central Building the rest of the night and ruined my throat with ammonia. Couldn't discover much, though."

"Well . . ." sighed Guth, "let's get to hell out of this hens' nest and get to work again."

Billy revealed half-a-dozen Chron-guns and they were snatched up eagerly. But when he had been boosted up to the window again to look around, he paused and whistled softly. Then he dropped back to the stone flagging.

"Just like women," he complained, "to do things too late. The roof has a dozen guards on it. No sense trying to climb out. They could be waiting for us by the time we got down."

"Damn!" swore Guth. "We can't shoot them down. I'd like to spank that Gilbert . . . but there's no real harm in the rest of them . . . Oh, no offense, Steve."

"I'd like to spank her too," said Emory grimly. "Making a fool of herself and me. When this mess is over I'm going to teach her the lesson of her life!" He shook his cropped head angrily.

"Let's rush out through the door," suggested Billy. "We can make a mass action out of it."

"Right," said Guth. "But remember, no shooting. These confounded Chronnies put people away for keeps. Let's save that for Life For Sale."

"Sure," laughed Billy. He went to the door and leveled his Chron-gun at the lock. "But it's all right to sock 'em, huh? There's a blondie I've got my eye on. It may lead to pleasant complications. Stand by, everyone!"

HIS Chron-gun blasted a square foot out of the heavy metal door. Billy kicked it open and the crowd of men rushed through. They came upon a small ante-room that led to a flight of curving stairs. They were halfway down before a cry arose from below, and red and blue uniforms began to scurry.

Guth slammed a shot into the wall over their heads just to keep the women fluttering, but they didn't scare too easily. An uneven rank drew up along the high hall into which the stairs debouched. Fray Gilbert stood at their head, the silver pencil in her hand.

"Jig's up, Wilder," she called clearly. "As soon as you reach the bottom step we'll fire."

"Horse-opera!" he yelled and kept on down the stairs. They were only women, after all, he reflected, and they wouldn't be so eager to shoot those deadly little neuron pencils. It took a lot of nerve and experience to be able to shoot down a man point blank in cold blood.

"Last warning!" cried Fray as they thundered down. She raised the pencil and aimed directly at Guth's chest. He reached the last step and dove in a long driving tackle at her knees. His shoulder cracked her so sharply she cried out as she tumbled backward against the rank of girls behind her.

The other men held to their feet as they charged forward, scattering the red and blue furiously. Jinx Cauldwell reached down and yanked Guth to his feet.

"Nice going," grunted Jinx. "Come on, Guth!"

Guth grinned, then felt things go black as his heart stuttered. It seemed that stones knocked in his chest. He doubled over, hands pressed to his sides, gasping feebly for breath. So soon? he thought. The injection should have lasted until the afternoon. What had happened?

He stood stock-still, fighting to hold on to consciousness. The others had paused too, gasping. Guth saw Fray and her aides snap the glass and fabric

masks over their faces with a triumphant air. This, then, was their finish.

But Fray had doubled over again, despite the mask's protection, and was clutching at her ribs, a look of bewilderment on her face. That, thought Guth in astonishment, was peculiar . . . Didn't the masks help after all?

There was a slamming and a pounding at the front door and the tearing sound of splitting metal. Voices shouting: "Open in the name of the L.F.S.!"

Acting quickly, despite the agonized labor of keeping his lungs pumping, Guth touched Billy's arm and motioned. As he crawled off he heard Billy following him. He led the way back through the room and around to a small space under the flight of stairs. As they squeezed in silently under the steps, they were followed by a third crawling figure clad in red and blue, a figure in a gas mask still brandishing a silver pencil menacingly.

"You'd try to get me if we were the last two alive on earth," whispered Guth bitterly. Then they lay quiet, concentrating on their respiration, as The Salesman's Troopers came storming into the house.

THE half-hour they were forced to spend in hiding comprised thirty individual infinities. When at last the L.F.S. Troopers had left the house with the Scientists and Suffragettes in tow, Guth, Billy and Fray crept from their cubby-hole. Fray whipped the mask from her face.

"Why didn't it work?" she demanded of Billy.

He shrugged and glanced at Guth.

"I was afraid this might happen," said Guth. "News of our idea must have leaked out. The Salesman is a smart fella. He's altered his gas to a sub-molecular constituency that will even filter through fabric . . . The same way a virus will filter through ordinarily opaque material."

Fray threw the mask aside feebly. Her pale skin looked sallow against the flame of her hair, and the light silk blouse clung to her breasts moistly.

"I think I've got a solution to this infection," went on Guth, "if we can just get to my lab at the Administration Building."

"A man can try!" Billy tried to grin, but his lips were blue and he was trembling.

They got to their feet painfully. Guth eyed Fray.

"Don't you think it's time to forget politics?" he said gently. "This thing is bigger than either of us. Can't we bury the hatchet until we've beaten The Salesman?"

"I don't trust you," snapped Fray.

"Why? I'm reasonably honest."

"Honest enough to kiss me?" Fray gave him a scornful glance. "When you knew about Steve and myself. I thought Steve was a friend of yours."

"Oh," said Guth. He couldn't explain that when a girl is beautiful she makes one forget about friendship and loyalty. "Yes, Steve's a friend. I could say I'm sorry . . . but I'm not. I'll ask you a question. Steve and yourself . . . is that for keeps? Are you asking me to respect an engagement?"

Fray's eyes lowered and she refused to answer.

"That's all I want to know," said Guth soberly, "and I don't think there's any doubt about your answer. Now . . . what do you say?"

He held out his hand. Fray looked at him stubbornly and at last took his hand and shook it coldly.

"It goes against the grain," she said. "I hate you and distrust you. I despise everything you stand for . . . But I'll join forces temporarily. You can count on me."

"That's all I'm asking for," smiled Guth.

They stumbled to the street and paused to look out at the Hudson, blue sparkling in the morning sun. But the city streets were again filled with pain-wracked, sobbing people, victims of the new blast of sub-molecular gas.

All because of us, thought Guth. The Salesman tortures millions to make sure our gas masks won't help.

They followed the sickly stream of victims until they came at last to a White Helio. It stood in an open lawn of the long park that snaked along the site of what had once been ancient Broadway. A glance showed Guth that they were at mid-town. Fray's headquarters had been halfway between the Administration and Central Buildings.

FRAY took the injection first. She arose and stood to one side of the Helio Cabin as Billy Freeman seated himself anxiously. His flanks were heaving, his hands pressed to his ribs. It seemed to Guth that Billy mightn't hold out much longer.

"No," said the Clerk curtly to Freeman, "None for you."

"Why not?"

"I said none for you." The Clerk beckoned to the Troopers clustered around the safe.

"But I've paid," said Freeman.

"Get out!" snapped the Clerk. He held a sheaf of cards in his hand. Guth could see pictures on the cards. Shots of Billy, Jinx Cauldwell, himself . . . the entire staff. A rogues' gallery. Or, better still, like the lists of counterfeit bill numbers the treasury sent to shop keepers.

"Damn you," swore Freeman, struggling to his feet. "You dirty swine!"

He tried to plunge past the Clerk toward the shelves of antidote. A Trooper laughed, caught the reeling Billy by the scruff of his neck, and cuffed him across the face. Guth trembled with the effort of holding back. He knew it was senseless to make a fight of it in his weakened condition. He caught Fray's eyes and motioned with his head.

"Come on," he said, grasping Freeman's arm. "Let's get outside." He eased the half-fainting man out of the White Helio. Fray joined them and they staggered across the lawn. The guffaws of the troopers sounded behind them.

"Don't you see," said Guth. "That's the Salesman's reprisal against us for not obeying his orders. That's what the emissary meant when he said 'Obey or take the consequences'."

Billy nodded in dumb misery.

"But I don't understand," said Fray. "Why didn't they try to capture us . . . the way the others did an hour ago?"

"You've answered it yourself," returned Guth. " 'An hour ago.' That was a special squad that came after us. The regular Troopers probably haven't been tipped off yet to bring us in. But they will. That's why I hurried out of the Helio; that's why we've got to get to my lab . . . quick!"

They staggered hurriedly down toward the Administration Building with Fray between the two crooked men, vainly attempting to support their weight on her slim shoulders. But they bogged down under the strain of walking rapidly and concentrating on keeping their lungs going. They were forced to rest often.

The new gas attack had broken down what little communications that remained to Scienticity. The underground and surface transportation had failed altogether. There was not a gyrocab to be seen anywhere.

A quarter of a mile from their goal

they passed an empty lingerie shop. Guth straightened slightly when he caught sight of it, snapped his fingers and smiled. He left the others and vanished for some time into the vacant open store. When he returned he clasped a bulky, roughly done package under his arm. Shaking his head to their mute inquiries, he forced them to struggle on down town.

The Administration Building was empty when they arrived, an hour later, and they rushed immediately to Guth's lab adjoining his office. Fray looked around curiously at the lathe's and the neat racks of tools.

"Engineering," explained Guth shortly. "Dynamics was my department before I became Chief of Scienticity. Now I think engineering's going to be our salvation."

HE collected apparatus at one of the benches and got swiftly to work. The package he had brought with him he unwrapped and placed close beside him.

"I'll have to be brief," he said as he worked. "There isn't much time. The Troopers are propably combing the city for us at this minute. Naturally my office'll be the first place they search."

Guth selected two sheets of silvery spring steel from a locker. They were a foot wide, each, and five feet long. They glittered like metal snakes when he whipped them about experimentally.

"This gas," he went on almost absently, "has not attacked our lungs directly. It's paralysed the nerve centers in the medulla that stimulate the involuntary muscles of respiration and posture. That's why we must remember to breathe and remember to stand erect."

"So?" queried Billy.

"So if we can keep the lungs going mechanically, we've nothing more to fear. Right?" Guth turned. In his hands he displayed two odd garments. Billy stared. Fray laughed.

"Oh Lord!" she said. "Corsets!"

"Right." Guth beamed. "Inside each corset is a strip of spring steel that binds firmly around the ribs. A small spring motor contracts the spring fifteen times to the minute (that's about the normal respiration rate), and the spring produces artificial respiration. Fray, you'd better lace us up."

Despite the seriousness of the situation she was forced to laugh as she tugged and bound the corsets tight. A small wheel protruded under the right arm of each of the men. That, Guth explained, was for rewinding the motor.

"At least now you'll have to admit women are good for something," smiled Fray when she had finished lacing them into the tight fitting garments.

Guth paused and felt the steel strip around his ribs alternately tighten and relax as the motor whirred. It worked well, for an improvised job. His lungs were sucking in air without conscious direction.

"I'll admit a lot more than that," he said seriously. "Don't think I underestimate women, Fray. Maybe you've just failed to see the humor of the situation all along."

She stared at him a moment, then her vivid features broke into a lovely smile.

"Perhaps I have," she said.

At that moment they heard steps coming up the stairs of the Administration Building. Guth held up a warning hand.

The two men hastily threw their tunics over the respirators and then crept into Guth's office to await the unknown.

"Troopers," hissed Billy.

The steps came slowly to the head of the stairs, paused, then moved to the

office door. In silence they watched the heavy steel knob turn and then the high door push in. Fray poised her silver pencil. The door gaped wide to reveal the figure of Steve Emory.

He stared at them, his mouth drooping, then slowly oozed to the floor. His head clanged on the metal.

GUTH and Billy got him to a chair while Fray darted inside for water. When they had at last brought him back to consciousness he looked around and sighed.

"Thanks," he said, pushing away the glass, "you don't know how glad I am to be back here."

"You've had a tough time, fella," said Billy. "Better take it easy a while."

"No. . . ." Emory struggled up out of the chair. "No. . . . I didn't fight my way back here just to rest. Listen, things are pretty desperate for us. The Salesman's been drilling his Troopers. He's got them policing the streets. He's blackmailed every official in the city, threatening to withhold his antidote. Communications are down . . . the earth is like a body without a head!"

"And what's more," added Guth grimly, "the world can't even send help to us. No sooner does a healthy man enter the gas area than he too succumbs. . . ."

"Look," said Emory. "I broke out of the Central Building. I got away from the Troopers and came here. If there's a way out, there ought to be a way back in. Maybe we can locate The Salesman's gas plant and blast it to hell?"

"Sure . . . we're all set," soothed Guth, "but how about you? We haven't the time to make another respirator."

After they had explained their safeguard to Emory, he shook his head. "You're right," he said. "There isn't time. Besides, I managed to get an injection after I escaped. Fray and I have twenty hours immunity. That ought to be enough. . . ."

"Okay," answered Guth. He looked tensely at Fray, hating to place her in danger again. But he knew there was no way of leaving her behind. "We'll try and take care of each other, eh?"

It was delicate work, sneaking through the streets. Patrols of L.F.S. Troopers were on continual duty, trampling up and back the avenues, guarding key stations of the underground, surface and overhead transportation systems. The skyways and streets were strangely hushed, but for the stern clangor of the metal shod shoes.

They located an abandoned Helio and boarded it, just managing to squeeze four inside the tiny cabin. Swooping and threading their way through the concealing towers of the skyscrapers, they managed to avoid the White Helios of The Salesman and get to Fray's headquarters overlooking the Hudson.

There, they crept inside and waited while Fray slipped to a concealed safe and withdrew three silver pencils, duplicates of the weapon she carried.

"Here," she said as she handed one to Guth. "I thought I'd be using this against you. . . . Never thought I'd willingly hand over my trump card to my arch-enemy."

"Never an enemy, Fray," he said, taking her hand. "If we get out of this mess . . . you'll see."

THEY stood for a moment eyeing each other, totally oblivious of Steve's presence. Fray started to smile at him, then shook her head impatiently and strode back to the plane. In silence the others followed and presently, after ten minute's cautious flight and reconnoiter, brought the ship down alongside

the Ancient Weather Tower.

Steve Emory led them at a fast trot around to the rear of the Central Building. The streets were empty and silent behind the structure, and there was only the pungent, stinging odor of ammonia. Emory pointed to a small window, five feet over their heads, its lower sash gone.

Silently they boosted Emory up. Then he reached down and, one by one, hauled them kicking and struggling up. They were in a small storeroom cluttered with crystal wall panes stacked against the walls. Emory tiptoed to the door, thrust it open, and stepped through, motioning them to follow.

He led them through a wide low-ceilinged hallway that seemed to twine aimlessly through the building until at last they came to the elevator shafts around which looped the broad ascending circles of frosted crystal stairs. The odor of ammonia was stronger and there was a strange sensation of heat gusting up.

"We ought to head down," whispered Guth. "Heat and ammonia vapors. . . . They point toward the manufacturing plant."

"Below is where I came from," said Emory. "It's even hotter and smellier down there."

They dropped down the stairs, two flights of them, to a cellar. There was no illumination and they fumbled along in semi-darkness. The stench of ammonia burned stronger and they felt the heat piling up. Then the steps narrowed to a dark sloping tunnel and they descended another two flights through the pitch blackness in huddled single file.

The sub-cellar, fifty feet beneath the surface, was hideously hot . . . so hot that they gasped for breath, and then only sucked in the biting ammonia fumes. It was impossible to see anything, but as they clustered close together, they discerned the faint hum of machinery. Slowly, with the others treading close behind him, Guth groped through the blackness in the direction of the sound.

The crash of gongs that banged and clanged through the sub-cellar preceded the blinding light by only a split second. In an instant, they were staggering in brilliant white arc radiations that blinded them as completely as the darkness had.

"Alarm!" shouted Guth. "For God's sake, let's get . . ."

He turned and smashed blindly against Billy behind him, meanwhile clawing for his silver pencil. The cellar reverberated with the shriek of bells.

And it was only a full five seconds later, when his eyes had cleared, that Guth was able to see to the depths of the cellar wall and perceive the solid rands of L.F.S. Troopers surrounding them. And only faintly above the reverberations of the dimming gongs could he hear a voice that laughed softly.

"Very nice indeed. The prettiest trap I've ever set in all my career."

Guth turned and stared uncertainly.

"You?" he said slowly. "You're The Salesman?"

"At your service," said Steve Emory.

EMORY stopped the last two Troopers to leave the small cell.

"These men," he said calmly, "each have artificial respirators on, under their tunics. Remove them."

Guth and Billy could only stand submissively before the nose of the silver neuron pencil Emory held, while the guards stripped them. Instantly, the steel flexion gone, they were forced to devote all their consciousness to breathing.

Emory stood there, looking at the two men and the girl.

"Well," he said smoothly, "we've come a long way, haven't we? Here you've been squabbling endlessly over votes for women. . . . It may make you feel better to know that under my system, there won't be votes for anyone. I'll do all the deciding."

"Go to hell, Emory," gasped Guth.

"You swine!" spat Fray. "With all your smooth talk and your gay romancing. You're vile . . . disgusting. . . . Oh, I can't find the words to describe you. If only I'd known!"

"But you didn't know," laughed Emory, "and that's what counts in the long run. Really, Fray, you made an excellent dupe. After I'd spurred you on to make a row about women's suffrage your agitations made a wonderful screen for my own preparations."

Guth stared at Fray.

"Emory put you up to it?" he asked. "The Suffragettes was *his* idea?"

Fray nodded miserably.

"And a splendid idea too," grinned Emory. "Fray attracted all the attention while I worked secretly without hindrance. I expect to control Scienticity within another six hours, and with the new variant of our gas apparatus . . . I shall have the United Nations in my grasp before the end of the month."

"And that variant is?"

"You've been so damned clever up to now," snarled Emory. "Suppose you figure it out for yourself. Pleasant dreams!" The cell door slammed and bolted behind him.

The prisoners lay silently in the darkness for a few moments until their eyes accommodated. They were in a cell that was perhaps ten feet square. In the distance they could hear the whine and hum of gas generators, and occasionally the murmur of voices. It seemed to Guth that he could hear the high tones of women speaking, and he thought it likely that the other captives were caged somewhere nearby.

"I should have known," groaned Billy. "Now I realize how many cock-and-bull stories he told. That gag about watching the Central Building all night . . . He was probably down here altering his gas to offset our masks."

"I'm guilty too," said Guth. "I should have realized he was lying when he said he managed to get an injection after he escaped. Every White Helio Clerk had pictures of the entire Staff. None of us could have gotten a shot. And that phoney faint of his when he stumbled over us in my office . . . And that gag of trying to bribe his own man . . . Oh, I could kick myself!"

"How about me?" whispered Fray. "I feel like such a God-awful fool!"

Guth heard her sobbing softly. He reached out and patted her shoulder helplessly. He felt weak and ineffectual. Everything seemed helpless.

IT was hot and enervating in the cell. Guth was exhausted from the efforts of the preceding day and night. All he wanted was to rest a while and gather little strength. He lay quietly, alongside Fray, and failed to realize his danger until he drowsed and the sudden pause of his breathing awakened him in a panic.

He started up in terror, crawled to his feet and kicked Billy.

"Get up," he said tensely, "get up, Billy . . . if you want to stay alive!"

"Lemme rest awhile," protested Freeman. The heat was sapping him too.

"Wake up and keep your lungs pumping," insisted Guth. "It's death to fall asleep!" He turned to Fray, staring wide-eyed in the gloom. "Help me get him up!"

They managed to get Freeman to his feet, and together the two men, half-supported by Fray, paced the length of the cell.

"Talk . . . sing . . . shout . . . anything!" commanded Guth. "You've got to keep us awake, Fray!"

As she sang and talked they passed and repassed the length of the tiny room, each time feeling the gush of air from the ventilator blow across their faces. It became almost automatic. Guth could count the number of paces up to the ventilator, the turn, and then the ventilator again on their way back.

"It's no use," groaned Guth, "He'll fall asleep on his feet. Lay him down."

They lay Billy on his face. Guth kneeled at his hips, placed his palms above the small of Billy's back and began a slow artificial respiration in time with his own forced breathing. As he pumped air in and out of Billy's lungs, the exhausted man slept.

At last Guth gave up in exhaustion. Motioning Fray to take his place, he arose and tottered around the cell. He went to the ventilator and placed his face in the stream of cool air gushing in. The heat was knocking him out too, and only the fresh air could keep him awake. He had to stay awake, for Fray could never administer to both of them.

Thank God for the ventilator, though. Otherwise the air in the cell would be exhausted and then . . .

"Oh God!" whispered Guth. "If only I'm right."

He crawled to Billy and kicked and shook him awake.

"Take off your clothes," he said. He looked bleakly at Fray. "You too, Fray, as much as you can spare."

In fevered silence they stripped off their tunics and handed them to Guth. He jammed the cloth tightly into the ventilator mouth, then crawled to the door and stuffed the remainder into the cracks. Returning to the middle of the cell, he fumbled in his pockets and withdrew a small petrol lighter. He kindled the flame and nursed it carefully.

"We've got to exhaust the air," he explained hurriedly, "and increase the CO_2 content. I've just remembered that if you inhale a large percentage of Carbon Dioxide it excites the respiration nerve center in the medulla. Maybe if we inhale enough we'll be able to offset the effects of Emory's Nitrogen gas. I have a hunch he used a CO_2 compound in his antidote. Go on, you two, breathe like hell!"

THEY inhaled and exhaled furiously. Guth nursed his petrol lamp until it heated and scorched his fingers. Fray produced a packet of matches and burned them, one by one, down to the very ends. There was almost a thousand cubic feet of air space in that small cell. It would take an enormous amount of work to exhaust it.

Hours later they heard the tramp of footsteps coming through the cellars toward their prison. Guth, naked but for a pair of trunks, his body gleaming with sweat, looked around and hastily extinguished the petrol flame.

"If the Trooper comes in," he said, "we'll have to pray he doesn't make us take our clothes down from the vent . . ."

"Guth!" whispered Fray excitedly. "It's taken. Don't you realize?"

Suddenly Guth discovered that he was breathing without volition. A nod from Billy confirmed this.

"All right," he said. "I don't know how long this stimulation will last . . . but we'll make a fight of it."

They sprawled in apparent helplessness on the floor as the guard unbolted the door and swung it in. A dim light from the cellar corridor illuminated the

cell. The Trooper carried a rough tray with food piled on it.

He strode into the cell, openly contemptuous of the helpless prisoners. But as he bent to set the tray on the floor, Guth slid forward swiftly and leaped to the guard's shoulders. As the man staggered back and swung around with an oath, Guth poised himself and brought his big fist savagely against the man's jaw. The guard barely grunted as he sagged. They caught him and lowered him silently to the floor.

Snatching up the Chron-gun from the Guard's belt, Guth motioned to the others and slipped through the cell door. They followed without waiting to don their clothes, and found themselves in a long corridor, lit intermittently by tiny crypton tubes.

Guth led them to the right, reached a door at the end of the corridor and opened it a slit. It revealed the large subcellar where they had been trapped hours before. An L.F.S. Trooper paced up and back leisurely, obviously on sentry-duty.

Guth waited patiently, despite the fear in his mind that the carbon dioxide stimulus would wear off at any moment. But he knew that the Trooper's saunter would eventually bring him within silent striking distance.

And at last the man wandered aimlessly toward the door. He paused six feet distant, whistling through his teeth, then turned. Guth leaped forward. The Guard pivoted at the creak of the yawning door and at that moment Guth's Chron-gun crashed down.

"Come on!" snapped Guth.

BARELY waiting for Billy to pick up the second Chron-gun, he sprinted across the cellar and thrust open the far door. There was a narrow black ramp leading down, deep into the earth. When they reached bottom they discovered a large brilliantly lit office. Desk, chairs, papers; and lab smocks and tunics hung on the wall next to a curtained archway.

Guth darted to the arch, swept aside the curtain and peered through.

"Listen, Billy," he said. "Go back the way we came. When you get to our cell, keep on *left* along the corridor and I'm positive you'll find the rest of our people locked up there. Then follow us back here, and through that archway." Guth pointed to the recess alongside the coat rack. "That must lead to the gas plant. Fray and I will go ahead to reconnoiter, but we'll need all the help you can bring!"

"Right!" exclaimed Billy. He darted back up the ramp.

Guth and Fray passed through the archway, carefully replacing the acetate curtain behind them. They were in a long straight tunnel. It was hotter than a blast furnace and the sting of ammonia was overpowering.

The tunnel seemed endless. It ran, straight as a hollow arrow, through the earth. The walls and ceiling were a smooth black glass that looked like obsidian, and set in the apex of the low overhead arch was a long straight crypton tube that illuminated the darkness dimly and stretched far ahead like a pastel pencil line.

Abruptly the tunnel opened into a small crypt, walled with rugged blocks of obsidian. The crypt was round, and across the floor was a flight of three narrow steps, a landing and a giant circle of steel. The heat was thunderous and behind the steel port they could hear the crashing roar of machinery.

Guth walked cautiously to the door. It was unlocked. He thrust it open to a slit, peered, then opened it enough to let himself and Fray slip through. They shut it behind them and stared at the laboratory.

It was built under the Ancient Weather Tower, hollowed out of the living rock underneath. A vast round chamber, forty feet in diameter, it towered upward over two hundred feet, full into the Weather Tower itself. Its height was interlaced by gleaming catwalks that ran from wall to wall at ten foot levels, and a narrow staircase spiralled dizzily up the circumference into the dim heights. Guth and Fray crouched back as they saw figures in white lab smocks clustered up on the cat-walks.

THE floor on which they stood supported four enormous atomic-cyclones that looked like gleaming steel snails. From the crest of each a giant crystal shaft emerged. Thirty feet above, the shafts merged into a maze of intricate crystal work. Lofting up over the nucleus of intermeshing crystal, a fractionating column zoomed into the heights.

The four shafts each bubbled up a brilliant liquid . . . crimson, cobalt, emerald and silver . . . and all liquids were merging in a blaze of sparkling radiance. The resultant gas that tinkled up through the beads of the fractionating column glowed like sparks over a fire.

"There's where the ammonia is coming from," said Guth, his mouth close to Fray's ear. He pointed to a ten-foot sphere between the steel-snail cyclones. It smoked with a milky vapor.

A shout echoed down, over the roar of the machinery. Guth lifted the Chron-gun and waited tensely. Figures began descending the spiral stairs, clattering faintly. From the far side of the laboratory a man in a white lab smock appeared, weaving in and out between the apparatus that dwarfed him.

It was Emory.

He came up and jarred to a halt at the sight of Guth. His jaw dropped.

"Tell them to cut off the apparatus!" yelled Guth. He levelled the Chron-gun at Emory's chest.

Emory stared for another second, then raised his arm slowly and waved. The drone died away in stages until at last the laboratory roared with silence. Emory never took his eyes from Guth's face. His assistants came down the stairs, one by one, and clustered behind him, gaping. Guth thought he recognized some of them from Emory's department.

"Well . . ." Guth smiled mirthlessly. "We certainly have come a long way, haven't we?"

Emory didn't answer. Guth swept the Chron-gun in a slight arc that included the rest of the men.

"Now," he continued, "we're going to stand here, just as we are, and wait for my friends to arrive. I don't know what keeps me from dropping you murderers right now. I wish one of you would try something . . . just to give me the excuse."

For a moment he thought Fray had begun to hum a tune.

Then he realized she had moaned slightly. He twisted his head in astonishment to see her crumple against him, clutching at her heart in an agonized way that Guth knew meant the failure of the antidote. Instinctively, he bent to support her, then twisted in quick awareness of his position. But Emory's men had already leaped forward.

Guth blasted a shot at the foremost, and he went down with a cough. Before Guth could press the firing stud again, the others vaulted the shuddering body and were on top of him. He lashed out frenziedly and crushed the Chron-gun against a temple.

His arm tangled in the skirt of a smock and before he could free it, it was pinioned. He lurched violently

to shake loose and drove his left fist into a distorted face. It dissolved into a red pulp, but a great bear-like man wrapped his arms around Guth's elbow and held.

THERE was no sound in the lab but the pant and sob of fighting men. Then Guth heard Emory rap out: "Get his legs, you two!" and his feet were yanked from under him. As he was swept up, he broke his right arm free and scooped up the Chron-gun from the floor. He levelled it at Emory.

Then blackness swept over him. Guth felt stones begin to rumble in his chest, and he knew that the CO_2 had worn off. The gun dropped from his inert fingers. He sobbed in the effort to fill his lungs with air and drive back the impending coma.

They tossed him to the floor alongside a reagent table, with his head almost in Fray's lap. She, too, was gasping and fighting to hold on to life. Emory stood over them, flipping the Chron-gun in his hand. He smiled malevolently, then started as he heard the sound of footsteps thundering outside, coming down the tunnel.

"Lock the door, quick!" barked Emory. He looked at Guth as the bolt fell into place. "Your rescuing friends, no doubt. Well, we'll give them a little party. Have you figured out the new development of our apparatus yet?"

Guth compressed his lips and searched around desperately for an opening.

"I'll tell you," went on Emory, "so you can appreciate it. A nitrogen gas . . . we spray it, like a liquid, it's so heavy. Naturally we're all immunized, but you're not. One whiff and the blood carries a corrosive that destroys every neuron in the body. Leaves the target a living mass of protoplasm . . ." Emory paused and bowed to Fray. "Your own neuron pencil gave us the final clue, *darling*. Thanks very much."

The steps outside rumbled up the door and slammed against it. It shook under a barrage of knocks. Voices shouted faintly. Guth wanted to yell a warning, but his heart was knocking under the strain and his lungs refused to take in enough wind for a shout.

Emory ran to his apparatus and signaled. The roar of the cyclones crowded everything else out of Guth's ears. A long flexible glass hose was run from the interior of the apparatus to a small pump of chrome and copper. The gleaming nozzle was aimed at the door and Emory nodded to one of the assistants. The man grinned and started toward the door.

Guth looked around frantically for anything to signal with. If he could just throw something at the door to land with a smash . . . that might warn Billy and the others. He glanced up and saw the tall reagent jugs standing on the table over his head.

He struggled to raise himself but tottered weakly; then he gave Fray a despairing look. She raised her knees slowly, just enough to brace Guth. His eyes lofted like a slow elevator and at last reached the level of the table. And then he saw hope.

Iodine! Five litres of iodine.

Iodine and ammonia . . . and the room was hot!

Hot and bright with light!*

Emory saw him just as his trembling

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* When liquid iodine is mixed with ammonia, under the influence of heat and brilliant light, it forms a chemical combination that is singularly unstable, and inevitably results in an explosion of terrific violence. What Guth did here was a simple trick that many an amateur chemist has regretted performing in the basement—and one *you* should not try to duplicate, even if you don't believe us!—Ed.

hands reached the bottle. He leaped from behind the gas sprayer with a shout and plunged toward Guth.

Guth managed to swing around, the bottle cradled in his arms, his back braced against the table-edge. As Emory came up to him, he summoned every erg of energy to raise a leg and drive his heel into Emory's stomach.

And as the man staggered back with a hoarse cry, Guth raised the heavy bottle high and flung it crashing across the laboratory, full into the great sphere of ammonia. Then he dropped his body over Fray.

There was a shattering explosion!

GUTH WILDER awoke and tried to scrape away the dark. Eyes out of focus, he made out the shattered remains of the laboratory; then dimly, he realized that Billy Freeman was kneeling over him, half-naked and grinning like the Cheshire cat.

"How long have I been out?"

"Maybe five minutes . . . maybe ten. We got to you just in time. We were trying to blast open the door with our Chronnies when the explosion blew it out in our faces."

"Ten minutes?" echoed Guth.

"Yeh . . . We had to use artificial respiration on the two of you until I could get the hypos ready. I had the antidote with me and shot you and Fray as quick as I could. It's peculiar stuff . . . Frosty Adamson says it's probably di-nitro-carbonate . . ."

"Never mind Frosty," said Guth impatiently. "How'd you get the stuff?"

"Oh, simple. When I went back to look for the others I stumbled on Emory's pharmaceutical storeroom. There were thousands of hypos and ampules. He must have been preparing this overthrow for years. When I located the other people I shot them up and brought along a little for you."

"Thanks, pal," said Guth fervently. He sat up and felt gingerly at the torn cuts over his body.

"Emory?" he asked.

"He's dead. Explosion got him and half the crew. The place is a smithereeno. What blew up, and how?"

Guth grinned. "I took a wild chance and it worked. I heaved liquid iodine into ammonia. Get it? Hot room, bright lights . . ."

"Yeh," said Freeman, "but . . ."

But Guth wasn't listening any more, for Fray had struggled up weakly alongside him. He put an arm around her and looked at her vivid features.

"Truce?" he said softly. "Bury the hatchet forever . . . Smoke a peace pipe, and suchlike?"

"Maybe we've both been wrong," said Fray. Her face was lovely despite the lines of fatigue. "I . . . I know I've acted like a fool in some ways."

"Maybe we've both been a little foolish," smiled Guth. He felt the scent of her breath on his cheek. He sat amid the debris of the broken laboratory, close beside her, and remembered again that she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen, and that a man couldn't build his whole life around science and Scienticity.

"The last time I kissed you," he said, "Holy Hell broke loose. Do you think it's safe this time?"

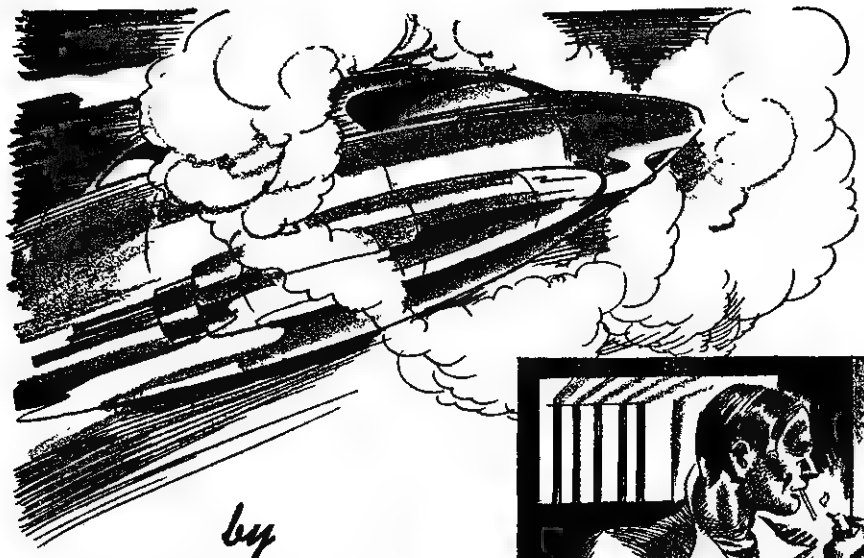
"A man could try," answered Fray.

The crowd in the smashed laboratory stared silently. Women in soiled red and blue uniforms; short girls, tall girls, incredulous girls. Men in tattered Staff tunics; short men, tall men, incredulous men.

"Nice work!" drawled Jinx.

"Couldn't do better myself," grinned Frosty Adamson.

"I don't know about that," murmured Billy Freeman. He edged around the crowd toward that blonde.



by

P. F. COSTELLO

"MY SON is a worthless, yellow-bellied young scamp!" Bull Harker thundered. "And it's all my fault, y'hear? All my fault!"

I was sitting in Bull Harker's magnificently furnished main office as he strode up and down the thick carpet, his big body jarring the floor with each step. Looking at his powerful, dynamic features it was easy to understand how he had battered and fought his way to the supreme control of Interspace Transport Co. But it was difficult to understand how this man had raised a son whose only interest in life seemed to be the quantity of Venusian rum he could put away at one sitting, and how many space ships he could burn out every month.

Every one who worked for Interspace knew what a wild young hellion the boss' son was. It was also conceded that it was just a matter of time before the Old Man would lose his patience and do something drastic about it.

This seemed to be that time. While I was out on a scheduled run, young

REHEARSAL FOR DANGER

The idea was to make a man out of young Harker, but not with a stunt as real as this one was . . .

Young Harker lashed out with his fist and hell broke loose

Harker had filled a passenger transport with a mob of drunken kids and arced off into the void on a pleasure jaunt. When he brought the ship back, four of its six forward rockets were burned to a black crisp.

Now—the rumor was flitting about the Base—the Old Man was fed up. But definitely.

He had called me in and, as I sat in his office watching him stamp up and down the carpet, I had an uneasy hunch what he had in mind for me.

He stopped abruptly in front of me and glared at me as if I were the cause of his trouble.

"You've been with Interspace eighteen years," he said abruptly. "You've seen that son of mine turn into an insolent, disagreeable, spineless scamp in that time. Now what the hell's wrong?"

"You put your finger on it," I said grinning. Knowing Bull Harker for eighteen years I wasn't afraid of him. I think that's what he liked about me.

"What d'you mean?" he demanded.

"It's your fault," I said. "You admitted that a while ago. There's nothing wrong with that kid of yours. He's just restless and bored because he's never had any kind of a job to take care of. No responsibilities to put a weight on his head. He's wild and careless because he's never had to be otherwise. Now if he was to get kicked into the world and discover that it was a pretty tough place to get along in, he might settle down a bit."

Bull Harker strode to his desk and sat down, frowning. Finally a glimmer of a grin touched his mouth.

"I had the same idea," he said, "when I called you in here. It was my idea for you take the kid with you on your next trip to Base Eleven. Eleven, as I recall, is still pretty rough and unsettled. Out there things might happen," he paused and glanced at me meaningly before continuing, "things might happen that would make him appreciate the more serious side of life. I wouldn't have to tell you what those things might be."

I kept a perfect poker face.

"That's right," I said. "You can never tell what might happen to a young fellow on Eleven. Native trouble, poisoned food, attacks by space pirates. Any of them things might happen just like that."

"I see we understand each other," Bull Harker said gruffly. "I've tried everything else with that kid, but maybe this'll work. If he gets scared badly enough it might make him fight. That's what I'm hoping for."

"I can promise you," I said, getting to my feet, "that all and several kinds of hell will break loose on Eleven when we get there."

"I don't want him hurt, you understand?" Bull Harker snapped quickly. "I'm holding you responsible for that, Bill. But give him a thorough going over. Maybe there's a real man hiding behind that insolent, drunken face of his."

I had my doubts about that, but I didn't say so.

"We'll see," I said. "We surely will see."

ABOUT a week later I was standing with Bull Harker next to the Interspace mooring tower. The sleek length of my space cruiser was resting in the auxiliary rocket tube and I was all set for the trip to Eleven.

There was only one thing missing. And that was Bull Harker's son, Danny. He was scheduled as my assistant and he should have arrived at the mooring tower long before this, but there was not a trace of him.

"I'll break him in two, myself," Bull

Harker roared for the dozenth time. "I told him to be here in time. Does he think I'm running a suburban commuter service? Doesn't he know that five ships are waiting to use that auxiliary?"

"If he does," I said, "it isn't bothering him much."

For the next ten minutes Bull Harker panthered back and forth before me in a sulphurous silence. Then came an interruption. An interruption that skyrocketed the Old Man's blood pressure to the boiling point.

Through the main gate roared a glistening, bullet-like land car, headed straight for us. It was one of the superpowerful types powered with U-235. They were too fast almost for anything but the clearest stretches, but this one was flashing at us at about two hundred miles an hour, straight across the crowded mooring field. It was traveling too fast for me to recognize the occupants, but I knew the car belonged to Danny Harker.

About fifty feet from us the low slung car slewed with a protesting scream and slid to a shuddering stop not four feet from the ramp the Old Man and I were standing on.

In the front seat of the car was Danny Harker, a slim, sullen looking young fellow with light blonde hair, and bloodshot blue eyes. Alongside him was a gorgeous redhead, her head lolling against his shoulder. In the back seat were two more girls, asleep.

All of them reeked of Venusian rum, and plenty of it.

"You crazy fool!" Bull Harker grated. "Where have you been? And who are these girls?"

Danny Harker looked at the girls and shrugged.

"I don't know," he muttered. "Met 'em somewhere last night, I guess. All got drunk. Farewell party for prominent young no-good."

Bull Harker opened his mouth, but I tapped him on the arm and shook my head. It wouldn't do any good to read the riot act to the young kid now. In his condition it would only make him more resentful.

"Come on, Danny," I said quietly. "Let's get started."

He looked up at me sourly, then climbed out of his car.

"Okay, wet nurse," he grumbled.

We said goodbye briefly and climbed into my ship. The kid was sullenly silent, but when I cut in the power and we zoomed up and out of the tube, he gasped and turned slightly green. I thought he would be sick, but by the time we whizzed out of Earth's atmosphere into the void, some color was seeping back into his face. I set the controls for Eleven, threw a careless glance at the visa-screen to check the course, then relaxed against the back of my pilot's chair.

"We're going to have a great time on Eleven," I said, with what I hoped was a hearty ring in my voice.

The kid looked at me sourly, then closed his eyes and leaned his head against the *duralloy* wall of the control room.

"Isn't that just ducky," he said sarcastically.

Then he went to sleep.

AS WE rocketed on through the blackness I did a little speculating on my somewhat disagreeable charge. In spite of his sullenness and rotten manners, I felt that he couldn't be all bad. No son of Bull Harker could be. But the kid had led a pampered, lazy existence, and you could hardly blame him for developing into a spoiled, soft brat.

I decided grimly there would be nothing soft or easy about his stay with me

on Eleven. As a rule I'm against the rough treatment generally handed to greenhorns, but this was a case where I would have no scruples.

I was so busy with my thoughts that I hadn't kept an eye on the screen before him. Now, when I glanced at it perfunctorily, I saw that a small black dot had appeared in the right top corner.

Straightening up I watched the dot interestedly. It grew in size until finally I could see the miniature outlines of a dead black space ship, flashing along behind me. It was fitted with atomic cannons and this bothered me. Passenger and freight ships were not usually armed, and I couldn't see any military insignia on the ship behind me to account for the heavy arms it carried.

The strange ship following me suddenly disappeared from the front screen. I shot a worried glance at the side screen and saw that it had appeared there. Now it was coming up on my side, flanking me with its superior speed.

I didn't like it at all.

I tried more speed, but it didn't help. The black ship kept up, even pulled a little ahead of me. It was only about eighteen thousand miles from me now, and any ship that creeps up *that* close to another in the limitless expanses of the void does it with a reason.

What reason? I asked myself.

I soon found out. From the fore atomic cannon of the black ship a puff of smoke appeared, and simultaneously an orange bolt of scorching flame streaked across the front of my ship.

So that was their game! Obviously the black ship was one of the fast disappearing freebooters that preyed on shipping in the void. The blast from the cannon had been a signal for me to cut my speed to 460/460 which was the speed established by the Space Federation for inter-locking in the void.* That meant they intended to board us.

I shook the kid roughly, until he blinked his eyes and straightened in his chair.

"What's the big idea?" he grumbled.

"Maybe trouble," I said briefly. Even then I was able to appreciate something of the irony of the situation. Bull Harker had instructed me to create some phony trouble for the kid, and here was the real thing, dangerous and on the level.

The kid glanced up at the side screen, studied the black ship carelessly.

"What's up?" he asked yawning.

"We're going to be boarded," I answered tersely. I had already cut my speed to 460/460. There was nothing else I could do. "We aren't carrying anything valuable," I went on, "so I can't figure out why we're being stopped. Maybe they'll let us go after a search."

"And maybe not," the kid said carelessly. He didn't seem to be scared, just vaguely interested in what was going on. It was too soon though to know how he'd react when things got tough.

He leaned back in his seat then and closed his eyes.

"Don't forget to wake me up when they get here," he murmured drowsily. "I'm kind of interested in meeting a real live pirate."

Then, to my complete surprise, he dozed off again.

"I'LL wake you," I muttered grimly. I strode into the body of the ship

* This means simply that a set speed of 460 miles per minute was indicated for direct inter-ship contact in space; each ship cutting down to exactly that speed while traveling in a parallel direction, and then cutting in toward each other until contact was established. The signal "460/460" was used to indicate a wish to board a vessel in space.—Ed.

and prepared the hatchway for the locking of the approaching ship. It had disappeared from the screen altogether so I knew it was practically alongside now.

In about another couple of minutes I heard a metallic *bang!* Then a shuddering jar traveled the length of my ship and I knew we were locked to the side of the black raider.

Another five minutes passed while I knew air was being pumped into the hermetically sealed compartment created by the locked hatchways of the two ships.

Then I heard a metal clamp release, a door open. Then a heavy fist was pounding imperiously on the hatchway door of my ship.

I opened the door and three men with drawn electric guns in their fists shoved me aside and stalked into the ship.

They were all hard looking specimens of the space marauder type. One of them covered me with his gun while the other two made a swift search of the ship. The one with the drop on me was tall and lean with a viciously hooked nose.

"We aren't carrying cargo," I said quietly. "In fact there's nothing on board of any value."

"Shut up!" Hook Nose snapped.

The two other bandits returned then, ushering young Danny Harker before them. He still looked sleepy and uninterested in what was going on.

"It's him, all right," Hook Nose said. "Take him to the chief."

One of the men behind the kid nudged him with his gun.

"Get movin'!" he snapped. "Into the other ship."

The kid looked at him with sleepy irritation.

"Supposing I don't?" he asked.

The man behind him hesitated for an instant. Then his mouth hardened.

"If you don't you'll feel something very, very hot right between your shoulders."

"You wouldn't shoot me," the kid said, "but I'll go along anyway. Just to see how far you simpletons are going to carry this thing."

He disappeared through the connecting hatchways followed by the two men. Hook Nose turned to me, an ugly smile on his face.

"So there's nothing of value on board, eh?" he jeered. "Suppose Bull Harker's son ain't pretty valuable cargo, eh?"

It hit me then. Somehow this band must have learned that Danny Harker was riding with me to Eleven. Their object was of course to shake down his dad for everything they could.

"What happens to me?" I asked Hook Nose bluntly.

He shrugged.

"Depends on the chief."

I noticed that his thick index finger was curved lovingly about the trigger of the electric gun in his hand. There was no doubt in my mind as to my fate if Hook Nose had anything to say about it.

But in a few minutes one of Hook Nose's comrades stepped through the hatchway.

"Chief says to bring this fellow along," he said, in an unpleasant nasal voice.

Hook Nose relaxed the pressure of his finger on the trigger disgustedly. His close set, glittering eyes gleamed with frustration.

Obeying a motion from the thug in the hatchway I followed him into the black raider, Hook Nose trailing close behind me.

AS I was led down a corridor of the big space craft I noticed a half-

dozen more bandits, all as tough and ruthless looking as the first three I had encountered. I've knocked about the tough spots of the universe most of my life and it takes more than a unpleasant mug to worry me. But I was thinking about the kid. With his environment and friends, such as they were, I knew all of this would be strange and terrifying to him. Or so I thought.

The bandit ahead of me stopped at a door and knocked. I heard a gruff shout from within the room. Hook Nose prodded me forward as his comrade jerked open the door and stepped back. I stepped through the door, and the first thing I saw was the kid. He was lounging in a comfortable chair, in the act of politely covering his mouth with his hands to hide a sleepy yawn.

There was another person in the room. A tall, heavily set man with a heavy black beard and unwinking cold blue eyes. His face was flabby with fat, but not enough to cover the jutting angle of his massive jaw. Hair like stiff bristles, black and short, covered his round head. There was something about him, something of complete ruthlessness that raised the hackles at the back of my neck.

Without taking his eyes from mine he seated himself carefully behind a metal desk, one of the few items of furniture in the sparsely furnished room.

"You look like you been around," he said finally. His voice was husky, almost soft, but there was a faint rasp to it.

"Thanks for the compliment," I said drily. "Now what goes here?"

He jerked a thumb at Danny Harker, who was still lounging wearily in the chair, paying little attention to what was going on.

"He's young Harker," the Chief said. "His old man will part with a lot to get him back. And we're goin' to see that he does."

I watched and listened carefully as the man spoke. There was something about him that teased my memory.

He noticed my scrutiny and smiled without humor.

"You don't know me," he said. "But maybe my name is familiar to you. The Federation Police calls me the Angel."

The name *was* familiar. While not the biggest of the remaining space buccaneers, the Angel was considered tops in ruthless, merciless cruelty and callousness. A cold sweat beaded my palms as the realization of our plight struck home.

The Angel grinned wolfishly and stood up.

"You know you're not playing with a minnow," he said in his strangely soft voice. "You're doing business with a shark. And don't let me have to warn either of you twice that my word is law on board this ship and at my base. I'd as soon burn a man down as blow my nose."

There was a tense silence in the room for an instant and then the kid—young Danny Harker—laughed. An amused, indifferent chuckle that brought a quick flush of rage to the Angel's face.

"My, my, but aren't you the bloodthirsty fellow," the kid said sarcastically.

THE Angel's fists clenched into meaty mallets as he stepped around the desk and strode to the chair the kid was lounging in.

"You're a wise guy, are you?" he growled, and the rasp in his voice was a file on steel.

The kid surveyed him insolently.

"Wise enough," he said casually.

The Angel's face worked spasmodically. His big fists clenched until the knuckles whitened.

"Get up!" he barked.

The kid stood up nonchalantly. There was no trace of fear or anxiety in his face. His eyes mocked the Angel. With his hands stuck negligently in his pockets, a funny grin on his lips, he seemed to be defying him to do his worst.

The Angel grabbed the kid's shirt, jerking him close to him. His right fist drew back like a sledge.

"Go ahead," the kid said softly. He still hadn't taken his hands from his pockets. "Hit me. And when you do I can promise you that you'll regret it more than anything you've ever regretted in your life."

It sounded absolutely incredible coming from that slim, drunken playboy. But he meant it. There was no doubting the sincerity in his voice or the flashes of angry color in his pale cheek.

The Angel paused uncertainly.

"Go ahead," the kid prompted.

The Angel dropped his fist and shoved the kid away from him. There was a puzzled expression on his face as he wheeled and strode back to his desk. As if he had seen, for the first time in his life, something he couldn't quite understand.

"Get out! Both of you," he said, his voice again soft. "My men will take care of you till we reach the base."

His words were directed at both of us, but his cold eyes were staring straight at the kid. I couldn't tell definitely, but I thought I saw an uneasy uncertainty in them.

When we had left his quarters, Hook Nose was waiting to take us to a small, practically unfurnished room with a barred door. When this had slammed behind us, he leered at us and said.

"I'm kind of hoping you'll give me a chance to use this little toy."

He shoved his electric gun through the bars and flexed his trigger finger suggestively. What happened then was too fast for my eyes to follow.

For the kid, with a wide grin on his face, leaped across the room and ripped the electric gun out of Hook Nose's hand. Turning it around he shoved the muzzle within an inch of the amazed and terrified bandit's head.

"Open up!" he said briskly.

I felt my nerves squirming like a basket of snakes.

If Hook Nose let out a yell the kid's daring game would be over. But Hook Nose was too scared to think of that. His eyes were rolling wildly as he jerked open the door of the cell and cowered back as the kid sauntered out.

"Simple, isn't it?" the kid asked nonchalantly.

I FOLLOWED him out, flashing a look in both directions. Fortunately the corridor was clear. The kid's audacity had left me stunned. I have seen desperate men in all the crummy nooks of the universe, but there were few who possessed the calm resourcefulness Danny Harker had shown in the pinch.

As far as nerves were concerned, he didn't have any. He stood there in the corridor twirling the gun idly in his hands, a sardonic grin on his face.

"Well?" he asked, amusement in his voice. "What next?"

What might have happened next was anybody's guess, had not a sudden interruption occurred in the form of the Angel and two of his men appearing abruptly around the angle of the corridor.

They took in the scene instantly, and in a tenth of a second their hands were streaking for their gun belts.

But the kid turned and faced them, his gun resting loosely in his hand. He didn't have them covered for his hand

was hanging at his side carelessly.

"Go ahead and shoot," he grinned. "I dare you. In fact, I'll give the first man with enough guts to draw his gun, my wallet with everything in it."

The silence in the narrow corridor was terrible. The tension was something tangible, something you could actually *feel*.

The Angel's cold eyes locked with the kid's for fully ten seconds, then his hand slowly withdrew from the holster at his side. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl, but there was fear in his eyes.

The men at his side followed his lead. Their hands slipped away from their belts and dropped nervously to their sides.

"I ain't committing suicide," one of them muttered.

I suddenly found it difficult to breathe. The sight of the slim kid daring three ruthless pirates to draw their guns left me dumbfounded.

He actually looked disappointed. I decided then that the kid was a killer, as cold as the void itself, infinitely more dangerous than the Angel or any of his murderers.

"I hoped for a little fun," he said, still smiling. "I was getting ready to enjoy myself. But if none of you care to oblige me, I'll just have to wait for another opportunity."

With a contemptuous gesture he tossed the electric gun at the Angel's feet, turned—*and strolled back into the cell!*

My knees went suddenly hollow. I was too stunned to move. So was the Angel and his men. For perhaps five second the kid's terrifying effrontery held us stupidly motionless. Then, coming to life, the Angel drew his gun and pointed it at me.

"Get back into the cell," he said weakly. His voice was trembling slightly, and beads of sweat were popping out on his brow.

I was still too dazed to think clearly. Like a sleep walker I stumbled into the cell, and I didn't even hear the door bang behind me. The kid was lying on the narrow cot gazing up at me with cool nonchalance. He actually looked as if he had been amused by the entire episode.

"You crazy young fool!" I managed to gasp weakly. "What did you do that for?"

He shrugged his slim shoulders and yawned.

"No sense spoiling their fun," he said lightly. "I'll have the last laugh anyway, so they may as well enjoy themselves now."

His confidence in himself was amazing. But from what I had seen it wasn't misplaced.

"Of course," I said drily, "you've got it all figured out to make a last-minute escape. All the details worked out and everything."

"I believe I could make an escape," he said slowly, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "But," he grinned again, "I haven't got all the details figured out."

I didn't say anything more. To tell the truth I didn't have the nerve to try and tell this amazing kid anything. It was obvious, terribly obvious to me, that he had been woefully misjudged all of his life. He had been set down as a namby-pamby young punk, when actually he was one of the most potentially dangerous men I had ever seen.

FOR the rest of the trip to the Angel's hidden base the kid slept like an innocent baby. And I stewed. I couldn't even begin to see a way out of the hellish situation. For I knew that the kid and myself would never be allowed to

live after the ransom was collected. We would be eliminated as soon as the money tickled the Angel's greedy paw. For dead men make somewhat unreliable witnesses. The Angel knew that.

I knew all this and I couldn't close my eyes for worrying about it. But it didn't bother the kid. He slept straight through the trip until Hook Nose and three of his cute chums opened our cell door and ordered us out. I knew we had moored for I felt the shock of the deceleration rockets, but *where* we were was something I wouldn't even guess about.

The kid climbed to his feet and stretched. Then he sauntered out of the cell, bestowing a contemptuous glance at Hook Nose as he passed him.

We were led out of the black ship into cold sunshine. Climbing down the hatchway ladder I saw that the ship was moored in a fenced stockade against which green, luxuriant jungle foliage pressed hungrily.

Maybe we were on Venus. But the atmosphere seemed light for Venus. Also it was too cold. I noticed then that my two-passenger had made the trip with us, stuck to the black raider like a barnacle to the side of a liner.

The Angel was on the ground waiting for us. A gun was clenched, nervously I thought, in his big right hand. It was not trained on me, but on the kid. It was apparent that the Angel recognized the more dangerous of his captives.

"I want no funny business," he purred. "If you make any attempt to escape, you'll be shot down like dogs."

"It won't be just an attempt," the kid said lazily.

The Angel's dark face purpled with anger. But there was a frightened expression mingled with the rage. He looked like an angry man who was afraid of the object of his anger.

"I'm warning you," he said thickly. "Don't start anything."

"I'm warning you," the kid said softly, "not to try and stop anything I start."

It was crazy and wild, but there *was* a convincing chill to the way he spoke and looked at the Angel. Several of the bandits had guns in their hands trained on the kid. The Angel had his own gun out and yet—he backed uncertainly from the slim, youthful-looking kid who was slouching lazily with both hands jammed in his pockets.

"Get to your cells," the Angel said harshly, breathing hard. "Follow my men and—and don't start nothing!"

Two of his men motioned us forward with their guns, but the kid remained motionless, smiling at the Angel.

"Don't worry," he said softly. "I won't start anything."

He started after the Angel's men, but stopped and glanced back, smiling easily.

"I'll finish it!"

Then, with me trailing along bewilderedly at his side, he sauntered along behind the two bandits to a thick, squat wooden hut that was equipped with barred windows and a heavy windowless door.

INSIDE was nothing but two hard cots and two chairs. When the door slammed behind us, imprisoning us as tightly as rats in a trap, the kid broke out chuckling.

"Did you see his face?" he chortled. "He didn't know what to do or say. I tell you I haven't had so much fun in years."

"I wish I had your sense of humor," I said glumly. "How in Hades are we going to get out of here?"

"You got me here," the kid said complacently. "We'll just have to wait and see what's next on the program."

We didn't have long to wait.

That night two of the Angel's men ordered us from our cell and led us to another building of the same construction, but larger and without the barred doors and windows.

It turned out to be the Angel's office. He was waiting for us as we entered, blinking a little at the glaring illumination.

"We are ready to inform Mr. Harker," he said in his silky voice, "of the sad plight of his son. I have written the communication. All it requires is the signature of the young Mr. Harker."

My eyes flicked to his desk. There was an unsigned letter resting prominently on its surface. Glancing about I saw that several of the Angel's little helpmates were lounging against the wall, hands conveniently near their guns. But in spite of the apparently cut-and-dried order of things; in spite of the fact that we were outnumbered and unarmed, there was a definite tense nervousness on the faces of the men watching us.

I understood their feelings. Handling a man such as the kid had proved himself was no light matter. I wouldn't have cared particularly to be in their shoes.

As the Angel finished his little speech, the kid flicked a cool gaze about the room.

"And if I don't sign?" the kid asked insolently.

"We have ways of persuasion," the Angel purred. "They are not pleasant, but they are highly effective."

This seemed to amuse the kid. A mocking grin touched the corners of his mouth.

"How melodramatic," he said lightly.

The Angel pointed to the letter and the electrostylus lying next to it.

"Are you going to sign?" he asked, the rasp in his soft voice grating on our ears.

Young Danny Harker, the punk out of whom *I* was supposed to make a man, smiled, folded his arms carefully and said,

"You can go to hell!"

THERE was a stunned silence in the room, broken only by the Angel's hoarse breathing.

"All right," he grated. "You've asked for it."

Without taking his eyes from the kid he motioned to two of his men.

"Get the necessary persuaders."

The two men left the room hurriedly. The kid sat down and yawned, leaning back in the chair.

I have never seen such magnificent indifference. Lounging there you'd think he was waiting for a waiter to bring him a cold drink before he dozed off for a little nap.

It got on the Angel's nerves. Badly.

He panthered back and forth in front of the kid, shooting vicious glances at him. His big fists were clenched tightly, his flabby face was twitching nervously.

"Damn you!" he suddenly roared. "Don't sit there laughing at me. You won't be laughing in a few minutes. You're scared to the core, but you're trying not to show it. Damn it! You must be scared!"

"Must I?" the kid asked innocently. "I'd like to oblige but somehow I just can't do it. Maybe if you'd try making faces at me I might react a bit more satisfyingly."

The Angel stopped in front of him, eyes glittering coldly.

"I've handled some cool customers in my day," he said softly, "but nothing like you. These men in the room I used to think were dangerous. But compared to you they're a lot of school

girls playing with posies. You'd cut my throat and be telling your friend a joke over your shoulder at the same time.' '

"No, I wouldn't do that," the kid said very seriously. "When I cut your throat I promise you that I'll devote my complete attention to the task. Nothing could distract my mind from anything so pleasant."

The Angel snarled something unintelligible, but his hand crept furtively to his neck and massaged it carefully, as if relieved to find it still intact.

The two pirates returned then, each carrying a bucket in his hand. One bucket was filled with water to the rim. The other was filled with glowing hot coals.

They set them down close to the kid and stepped back.

"Before we make you wish you were never born," the Angel said harshly, "are you going to sign?"

With the arrival of the implements of torture, the Angel quickly resumed his confident, swaggering manner. For it was his ferocious cruelty that had made his reputation, given him his power and leadership.

The kid leaned forward.

"I told you once, Angel," he said, "where you could go."

The Angel's face twisted brutally. He stepped forward, and his men followed him, forming a tight semi-circle about the kid.

The kid was grinning again, a glint of puckish humor glinting in his eyes.

"I said," he repeated slowly, "that you could go—to—"

He bent quickly, jammed his hands wrist deep into the bucket of cold water. Then, before the startled Angel could move, he scooped a double handful of live coals and flung them into the circle of faces ringing him in.

"Hell!" he completed his sentence.

THE circle about him broke as the Angel and his men scrambled frantically away from the shower of hot coals. With a powerful boot the kid kicked the red hot bucket into their midst. The angrily blazing coals cascaded in a fiery stream about them, singeing, searing, blinding.

Two men leaped for the kid, but I stepped in and swung twice. A right and a left with every ounce of my weight behind them. They went down, sprawling queerly.

The kid leaped forward and kicked the scattered coals into the faces of the Angel's disorganized crew. A few hit their mark, but that was enough.

The Angel ducked out the door, and his men, leaderless and terrified, scuttled after him. I jumped to the door, slammed it and bolted it.

The kid was laughing uproariously when I turned from the door.

"Did you see their faces," he gasped between chuckles. "Never so surprised in all their lives!"

"Cut that," I snapped. "We've got to figure a way to take advantage of our break. Got any ideas?"

I knew that the Angel and his men would surround the house, waiting for us to make a break. They wouldn't have to be in any hurry to get us. They could afford to wait. We couldn't.

The kid pointed to a lead receptacle beside the desk.

"Looks like electron grenades might be kept there," he said indifferently. "A couple of those would discourage everybody."

"They'd blow us to hell, too," I said. Electron grenades had been outlawed on Earth because their destructive power and their instability were both practically limitless. You could never tell when a slight jar was going to set the things off. And when they went off the blast was like nothing you could

imagine.

The kid however had pried the lock on the leaden receptacle, disregarding my warning. My legs suddenly went hollow as his hands emerged from the box holding a light silver ball, about two inches in diameter and smooth as an egg.

"Take it easy," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. I was frankly scared as hell. Why the Angel kept one of those pills of danger around, I couldn't guess. Unless it was to stifle a possible mutiny. He'd stifle himself in setting an electron grenade into action, but maybe he didn't care. I did though.

"Handle that thing carefully," I warned the kid. "Put it back and forget about it. We want to leave here in one piece."

The kid grinned at me. He rolled the grenade around in his hand like an apple.

"Watch it!" I shouted, half hysterically. Anyone who has seen the effects of an electron grenade has a more than healthy respect for them.

But the kid strolled to the door, still smiling. With one hand he unbolted it and swung it open. Then he stepped through the door into the illuminated stockade.

I jumped after him, expecting a sizzling inferno of electric pellets to burn into him, but nothing like that happened.

For the Angel and his men, grouped in front of the house had seen the electron grenade in the kid's hand. They were backing fearfully away from him, their guns hanging limply in their nerveless fingers.

"D—don't!" the Angel pleaded hoarsely. "Y—you'll blow us all to atoms."

THE kid followed them slowly, juggling the grenade carelessly in his hand.

"I've never seen one of these go off," he said casually. "It might be worth watching."

"No, no," the Angel screamed, saliva frothing his lips.

The kid tossed the grenade into the air and caught it in his palm as it dropped. My heart had absolutely stopped beating. It often took less than that to set one of those unpredictable balls of condensed fury into violent action.

I spotted my two-passenger ship then, resting in a small tube. I headed for it, the kid following me leisurely.

He continued to toss the grenade from one hand to another as if it were a rubber ball, and I expected to be blown into oblivion any instant. Sweat was pouring from my face and my knees were watery as I staggered on to the expulsion tube.

"We seem to be leaving," the kid said insolently to the huddled group of pirates. "Any objections? Or is the little show all over?"

"For God's sake," the Angel gasped, his face pallid with fear. "Get out of here. I—I made a mistake in bothering an inhuman machine like you. Just leave me alone. Please!"

His voice almost cracked on the last word.

I released the valve on the hatch door of my ship and swung it open. Clambering in, I set the take-off rocket and the course adjustor. Flicking on the asteroid screen I was ready to blast off. But the kid was still standing in the hatchway, surveying the stockade and pirates moodily.

"Come on!" I snapped. "We haven't got a second to spare. These scum will blast after us the minute we leave."

The kid looked at me and grinned mirthlessly.

"You can relax, Grandpaw," he said

sarcastically. "I'm on to the little game. I have been all along. Did you think you actually had me fooled?"

"Fooled?" I shouted. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I heard you and Dad plan the whole thing," he said triumphantly. "I was right outside the office door listening when Dad and you cooked up this scheme to scare the pants off me. But it didn't work, Mr. Smart Guy."

I was suddenly dizzy. My knees almost buckled as the kid's words crashed into my brain. Having heard the conversation between Bull Harker and myself, he had believed this entire business was a fake staged for his benefit. Naturally he hadn't been scared. No wonder that he had behaved like a hero. My mind flashed to his cool amusement, his dauntless daring, his mocking disregard of the Angel's threat. Those things had been his natural reaction to a situation that he believed phony.

He had just been playing a game, secure in his knowledge that nothing serious was going to happen to him.

I STARED at him incredulously.

"So," I managed to gasp weakly, "you think this is a frame-up?"

"Of course," he grinned. "I had a hard job to keep from laughing in your face. You tried so hard to convince me that you were really worried that it was pathetic. From start to finish the whole thing was obvious. Even if I hadn't been tipped off I would have caught on. For one thing this phony electron grenade was a dead giveaway. No one in his right mind would leave one of these lying around. So I knew it was just another one of the props you had planted to frighten the little boy."

He tossed it carelessly from one hand to the other as he spoke.

"You fool!" I stormed. "Watch what you're doing. Do you want to be blasted into bits?"

He smiled at my wrath.

"Still carrying on the act, eh?" he said cynically. "Well maybe this will convince you that I'm not worried about a phony grenade."

He turned and tossed the grenade high in the air.

The Angel and his men broke, screaming madly, and I jerked the kid into the ship with a brutal heave and slammed the door shut.

I was leaping for the control lever when a mighty roar broke like thunder in my ears, and the ship shuddered under a sledge hammer blast. For a second I was too stunned to crawl to my feet.

But I was able to stick one hand up and shove the rocket lever forward. A sputtering crackle sounded behind and, with a giddying rush, the ship rocketed upward into the void.

When I had righted its zooming course and set the controls I turned back to the kid.

He was still lying on the floor, but his eyes were open and there was an expression on his face unlike anything I have ever seen.

"It—it *was* a real grenade," he said weakly.

I nodded grimly. If dead men could testify, the Angel and his men would corroborate that.

"Then," the words trembled on his lips, "the whole thing—kidnaping and all—was on the level. Not a fake?"

I nodded again.

I thought surely he would pass out. His face turned an absolute green as his thoughts flashed backward. It must have been a bad moment for him. But at the core there was good stuff in the kid.

"I've been a hopeless fool," he said shuddering.

"When you get around to admitting it," I said, "there's hope for improvement."

The kid was doing a lot of silent thinking as I set the course for Earth. As we arced through the limitless black expanses of space he said wistfully:

"If I *hadn't* thought it was all a fake, if I really had been a hero, Dad would be pretty proud of me, wouldn't he?"

"You bet," I said. I was silent for an instant. Then: "We might forget that you overheard a certain conversation. We'll just both forget that you thought it was all a fake."

The kid was silent for a long moment. Then he said:

"No I can't do it. I'm no hero and it would be cheap to try and pretend I was. We'll tell the truth when we get back."

I drew a relieved breath. I had been afraid he might have fallen for my bait. He was right. He wasn't a hero. But I'll fight any man who says he hasn't got the makings of one.

THAT MYTH ABOUT MAGIC

Believe in magic, eh? Well it's all baloney. Sure, there's a little of science, but mostly, you're gullible!

By GUY FAULDES

THE next time you're watching a tail-coated, top-hatted spade-bearded chap pulling a rabbit out of a startled patron's pocket on the stage of your favorite theater, don't sit back knowingly and smirk, "The hand is quicker than the eye." For that time worn bromide, we'll now inform you, is a lot of baloney.

The eye, dear skeptic, is much quicker than the hand. Any hand, even the hand of the slickest magician in the business. And the thing that sends us away from neat magical performances awed by what we've seen is not the fact that our eyes were too slow. It is, rather, that our brain was befoggled and tripped up.

For magic is—to a great extent—dependent on science. And the science it leans on in particular is psychology. Mechanical devices, mumbo-jumbo, cape waving, and all the other assorted gadgets that go with professional magic are not in themselves designed for deception as such. They are each interdependent on one another and completely dependent upon a psychological effect sought by the magician using them.

And the psychology behind all magic of the professional sort is in tricking our brain rather than our eyes. Through psychology our mind is misdirected, causing it to command our eyes to gaze intently on some utterly innocuous part of the trick while the magician deftly completes it utterly unnoticed by our betrayed senses.

Take the famous "silent" magician, The Great Cardini. Cardini, noted as being the top man of the suave school of magic, is a sleek, moustached, monocled, good looking devil who invariably is attired in the smartest of evening clothes. His very walk, smile, bland air of complete nonchalance all go into building a fascination over the definite character he is portraying. The moment you see Cardini step into the spotlight, you are fascinated by the personality he is acting for you. *It catches your attention to hold it subconsciously for the duration of the performance.*

The very suavity of The Great Car-

dini's appearance is in itself soothing and pleasing. His mannerisms are additionally so. When he smilingly twirls his stick it is done so naturally, so effortlessly, that you watch with breathless enchantment. And as he twirls it, he might possibly show you with a courtly wave-and-switch of cane into either hand that he holds nothing in his palm. But the stick twirls; your attention is still unwittingly held by it, until you are startled in the next instant to see a deck of cards appear from thin air!

Your mind was misdirected. Cardini smiles and tosses his stick to an assistant. Then, nonchalantly, holding the card deck at arms length, the great magician does incredible things with it. It grows, it dwarfs, it disappears, it changes color. But while this goes on Cardini has gestures, slight, suave, natural gestures—such as touching his monocle lightly with his free hand—which, though you are unaware of it, divert your attention just long enough for him to accomplish the necessary mechanisms of each trick. Sometimes a facial expression—and Cardini is a master of pantomime expression—is enough to divert your mind long enough for the master to bewilder you.

And then, to add to your impossible task of trying to trip up a master magician, there is another psychological factor. The moment a trick is finished, the magician is off to a fresh one. It is obvious that a brain still puzzling over the feats of the first astonishing performance, and trying to wrestle a solution out of it, is much too crowded to successfully follow the next feat. The snarling up becomes even greater.

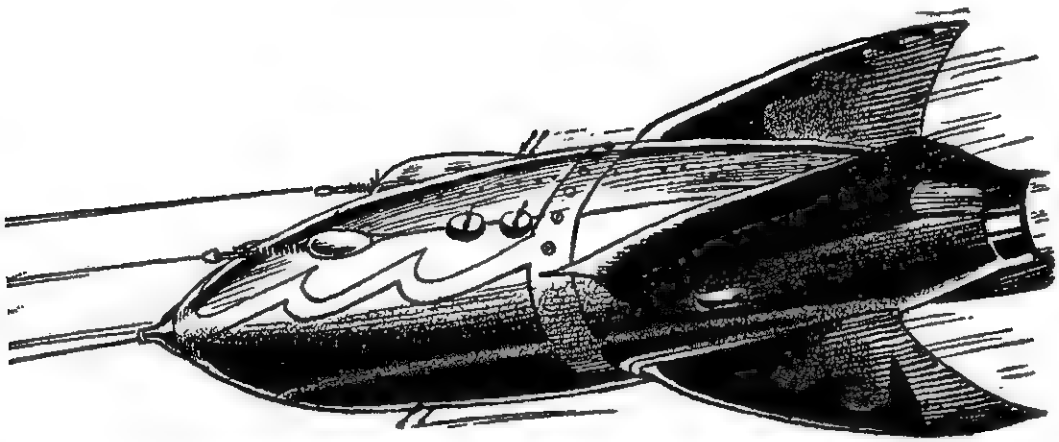
Incidentally, it might be well to know that another myth about magic is that distance gives advantage to the magician. This, in spite of its more or less logical supposition, is not true at all. The reverse is true. Almost any professional magician can tell you that the angles of vision from a distance are greater than at close proximity. From four feet, you'd have difficulty in watching both hand of a magician, whereas from forty feet you could do so with ease. In spite of this fact, however, Joe Sucker is much more entranced by tricks performed under his very nose, since he wrongly considers them to be far more difficult.

It is the commonplace gestures of a magician, such as Cardini's squinting astonishment at an object that pops unexpectedly into his hand, that must be watched most carefully. For while Cardini bends over an unexpected egg in his hand, feigning astonishment, you must realize that he's bringing the object much closer to his person, thus setting up the trick that will make something even more incredible happen to the egg. And the harder you try mentally to catch up with the magician, the easier it is for him to fool you.

However, in case some of you are feeling a little like lame brains by now, here's an accepted assertion—agreed to by all the masters of professional magic—that should make you feel better for having been duped. It is a fact that the most intelligent persons are most easily deceived by magical hocus pocus, while the childish and moron bracket minds are the hardest to trick. Adults notice only an indicated object to which a finger points. Children notice the fingers first, then turn to the object. And when a master magician indicates an object which, for psychological reasons of trickery, he wants you to notice, he'd rather you looked at the object and not at the hand with which he drew attention to that object. For nine times out of ten, there's something up his sleeve.

All right now, pick a card—any card!

Herrick leaped forward and put all he had behind a surprise blow



Q SHIP of SPACE

by DUNCAN FARNSWORTH

Herrick was proud of his new command, but this innocent freighter took him down a notch or two!

"MY OWN ship, at last!" Junior space officer Andrew Herrick breathed the words as he stood on the bridge of his slim, snub-nosed, rocket cruiser, *Astera,* feeling the pride that is the just dessert of any man in charge of his first command.

The *Astera* was on patrol, four days out of Space Station Forty, and carried a crew of four officers and a hundred men. To the ordinary eye the *Astera* was just one of a thousand such patrol vessels designated by the Space Command of Earth Federation to keep sharp eyes on constant lookout in the danger zones of the interplanetary chain.

But to young junior space officer Herrick it was much more than that. It was *his* ship, and *his* first taste of complete authority and responsibility in this Sixth World War.

"Coolness and efficiency during interplanetary action around the Martian port of Wereza," was what the citation young Herrick received four months ago from the Space Command had stated. And his meritorious behavior during that engagement had earned him this command. Now he was anxious to carry on his record, to

make a name for himself that would some day be equal to the legendary honor accorded to some eight Herricks of the past and present who served in the space forces of Earth Federation.

Young Herrick considered himself obliged by the glory that was emblazoned on his family record to carry on—at least to the point where he would some day be able to attain the post his father now held, that of admiral of the Fourth Battle Fleet of the Federation Space Forces.*

Herrick felt warm in the pride his father already felt for him. And as he stood on the bridge of the *Astera,* feeling the steady vibration of the rocket motors under the decks below him, his hand sought his right tunic pocket where old Admiral Herrick's recent vizagram rested. It was a short, terse note, typical of his father.

"Congratuations on new command. Good luck. How's Myra getting along? Vizagram as soon as you learn anything."

Young Herrick grinned as he thought of this message. Everyone in the Fourth Battle Fleet, of which the *Astera* was a part, seemed to be waiting for news of Myra. His father, of course, more than anyone else.

A vizagraph officer, a moon-faced youngster named Maloney, approached Herrick and saluted.

"Beg to report message from doctor, sir."

"Yes?" Herrick's voice quickened with interest.

"Nothing known as yet, sir," answered Maloney, and it was plain from his voice that he was as disappointed at the lack of news as his young officer.

Herrick saluted.

"Thank you, Maloney."

THE bridge bulkhead door swung open as Maloney stepped out, then was filled with the white-tuniced uniform of another young space-bronzed junior officer.

Herrick smiled at his second-in-command, as Jon Roberts took his place beside him.

"Any news about Myra?" Roberts asked.

Herrick shook his head.

"Not yet. But motherhood is certainly causing quite a fuss around the Fleet, I guess."

Roberts showed quick loyalty in his glance, as he replied.

"You're darned right it is, Andy. Everyone's anxious about Myra. You can't blame them."

Herrick patted his second-in-command's arm.

"Of course," he said. He had a great affection for the stocky, wide-shouldered Jon Roberts. They'd been classmates at school together. This command of Herrick's was the first reunion they'd had since graduation. Herrick had asked for Roberts as soon as he knew he'd been given the *Astera.*

Roberts changed the subject.

"This has been a pretty peaceful four days so far, eh, Andy?"

Herrick nodded.

"But each day takes us farther out on our own, Jon. And I've a feeling something should be brewing for us pretty shortly."

The junior officer's words keynoted the spirit of his men aboard the *Astera.* All of them were impatiently eager for a taste of action. For they

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* Sixth World War—Began in the year 2300 A.D., and was fought on a vast interplanetary front between the forces of Earth and Mars, over supremacy of trade in the outer Interplanetary Space Zones. Much of the action in this war depended on the destruction of shipping tonnage by both forces. It ended in the year 2310, with a treaty victory for Earth Federation, recognizing the freedom of trade in space.—*Ed.*

were all aware that these were dangerous space locales, and that frequent skirmishes against Martian space patrols were reported from this district.

For a moment young Herrick was silent. Then he said:

"Well, this inactivity at least means that some of the poor devils running merchant space freighting aren't being blown to hell." He sighed. "Not in our radius of patrol, at any rate."

The bulkhead door banged, then opened, and Maloney, red-faced and breathless entered the bridge tower. He held a vizagram message in his hand.

"I'll bet it's about Myra," Roberts burst forth excitedly. "I'll bet her bab—eh, huummph," he cut off, embarrassed at his outburst in front of Maloney.

Herrick had taken the vizagram, was scanning it, while Roberts impatiently waited to find out what was in it. Herrick's face was grave as he looked up.

"Another ship in distress, a space freighter as I gather it. Our vizagraph picked up the distress signals. We seem to be closest." He crumpled the vizagraph into a ball, hesitating for an instant. Then to Maloney, he barked. "Tell our chief rocketeer to put full speed ahead, relay the distressed space freighter's position to him."

Maloney saluted and was gone.

Herrick turned to Roberts.

"Not so far away from us," he said tersely. "Sounded, from the name of it, as if it were a Junovian tub. We'll see. Maybe it's only a question of a rocket breakdown."

Roberts flushed eagerly.

"At any rate," he observed, "it will be a bit of action."

"Probably," Herrick agreed . . .

HERRICK stood on the bridge of the *Astera,* with Roberts beside him, as they came within vizascreen distance of the distressed freighting vessel several hours later.

"A big baby," Roberts exclaimed, peering down into the vizascreen.

"Big is right," Herrick answered. "She's at least twice the length of the *Astera.* And I was right about the name sounding Junovian. Look at the pennant she's flying."

Roberts nodded his head in agreement.

"Yeah, Junovian, all right." He shook his head. "Seems to be just drifting in space. Wonder what's the trouble?"

Herrick snapped off the vizascreen, and turned the knob of the panel before him, switching on the intership communications screen.

"Get the space lifecraft in readiness," he barked. "Pick a crew of twenty volunteers to man two of them. We're going to board this craft to have a talk with her captain." Then he flicked off the button.

"You're a volunteer leader for one lifecraft," Roberts said quickly.

"Very well," Herrick answered. "You take the second lifecraft, Jon. I'll skipper the first."

Herrick started toward the door of the bridge. Roberts was just a step behind him. Together they made their way down the companion ladder and onto the glassicade turreted deck of the *Astera.* As he had ordered, Herrick saw twenty of the crew lined alongside two space lifecraft, standing smartly at attention. He smiled to himself. There'd probably been a whale of a battle to get volunteer posts. Each of the men was so keyed up for any kind of action that he'd jump at the chance even to get in on such a mundane rescue job as this.

The steady-roaring rocket tubes of the *Astera* were slowed almost to a stop now as the patrol cruiser drifted

closer to the huge, dirty Junovian space freighter.

Herrick turned to Roberts now. His manner was crisp and devoid the familiarity he'd had on the bridge.

"Officer Roberts, man the second lifecraft. Follow me. I'm leading in the first."

They exchanged salutes. Then Herrick turned away, and a moment later was taking his place in the stern of the atomic powered lifecraft as ten of his crew took position. His hand was steady on the driving gear as the atomic mechanism of the davits went into action and the small space craft was lifted up from the deck.

Then the glassicade turrets along the rail of the *Astera* dropped away, and the tiny lifecraft was dangling out in space. The davit controls released, and Herrick threw the atomic motor throttle forward, catching power.

He saw the glassicade turrets cover over the deck once more, then turned the nose of his lifecraft away from the *Astera* and pointed it in the direction of the huge, grimy, space freighting Junovian vessel.

Two minutes later and Herrick was boarding the stinking hulk of the Junovian freighter. Roberts was behind him as they stepped on the deck. In each of the lifecraft, the crews waited off from the vessel.

THE captain of the freighter stood waiting to greet them. He was a tall, black-haired, thick-shouldered fellow with a face that bore the leathery black wrinkles of space burn. His teeth were white and even as he saluted and smiled.

Herrick returned his salute.

"I'm Junior Officer Herrick, of Earth Federation, in command of the *Astera*," he said. Then, indicating Roberts: "This is Officer Roberts, my second in command."

The freighter captain saluted again, still smiling whitely.

Herrick said, feeling strangely uneasy that the freighter captain hadn't spoken as yet.

"You understand Earth language?"

"Certainly," the black-haired captain said easily. "Sorry if I appeared rude. Glad you picked up our signal, Officer Herrick."

"What's y o u r trouble?" Herrick asked, looking around the strangely spotless deck of the big craft.

The freighter captain seemed to be gazing over Herrick's shoulder. He was still smiling. And then, quite suddenly, his hand shot to his tunic pocket and reappeared holding a vicious-looking electric pistol. He had it expertly trained between Herrick and Roberts.

"Don't be so foolish as to show any signs of alarm that might be noticed by the men standing off in your ship's lifecraft, please," he said pleasantly. "Three of my crew are behind you. All of them have you covered. Please follow me to my stateroom."

Roberts was choking in swift rage.

Herrick was calmer, but a sinking sensation was in the pit of his stomach.

"First of all," he said coolly, "you'd better explain what this means, Captain."

"This space craft is not, I am sorry to tell you, a Junovian vessel," the captain said smilingly. "You will learn the unpleasant details swiftly enough. Come." He snapped the last word like one used to being obeyed.

Herrick felt an electric pistol prod him in the back. He turned to Roberts.

"Come on," he instructed. "We'd better stick along for a bit." He was sickly aware that the men standing off in the lifecraft couldn't see any of this. And he was bitterly regretting that he hadn't boarded this freighter

armed. But there was no time for post-mortems now. They were being marched along the deck to a spotless duralloy ladderway that led to what seemed to be the second bridge of the freighter.

Roberts whispered, "What in the hell is this, Andy?"

Herrick didn't answer. He took his time ascending the duralloy ladderway, letting his gaze travel back over his shoulder as often as he dared, scanning the deck of the big freighter with keen eyes.

Then they were on the second bridge. And Herrick saw that there was a vizagram apparatus in operation here. This was the machine over which the distress signal had obviously been sent.

A yellow tuniced operator sat before the vizagram machine. And to Herrick's keen eyes the chap seemed, like the spotless deck and shining duralloy ladder, out of place with the ragged dirty appearance of the freighter when they'd first sighted it.

The three of the freighter's crew who'd followed behind as the captain led the way up to the second bridge were still present, their electric pistols trained on Herrick and Roberts. The captain shoved his own weapon back into his tunic pocket, and now stood beside a short instrument panel.

He pressed one button, wordlessly, and an alarm bell rang somewhere in the bowels of the great vessel.

The captain stepped over to the bridge rail.

"Look," he instructed, pointing down to the big expanse of deck.

HERRICK followed his pointing finger, and his jaw fell open in astonishment. Roberts, who'd also stepped to the rail, couldn't restrain an incredulous gasp. The decks of the freighter were alive with almost two hundred men!

They moved swiftly, efficiently, as if trained to every motion. Some took their places inconspicuously along the rail, while others stood beside duralloy turrets of deck hatches. Herrick wheeled to face the captain.

"What the hell!" He was angered, astonished, breathless, his voice demanding explanation.

The captain was still smiling.

"This is quite a mystery ship, eh, Officer Herrick?"

"What is this?" Roberts demanded.

"A long, long time ago," the captain said, "there was an ancient device called a 'Q' ship. Its purpose was to serve as a lure, a bait, a decoy, in time of war to gather merchant shipping close to it by faked distress signals. Generally it was an especially well armed craft disguised as a merchantman. This so-called space freighter is exactly that. You are on board an extremely modern counterpart of that ancient weapon of war. This 'freighter' is a fast, well armed space fighter. We have been operating in this interplanetary zone for quite some time, destroying much shipping which would otherwise have been valuable to the Earth Federation."

"That's insane!" Roberts scoffed.

But the captain's eyes were on Herrick.

"I want you to vizagram your ship. Tell the officer in command to surrender, or we'll blow the *Astera* out of the void," he ordered.

Herrick looked once down at the deck. The men who had appeared there were still at their strange stations. He licked his lips. This was hardly a bluff, but—

The captain saw the indecision in his eyes. He turned and pressed another button. And Herrick blinked.

A shell—the faked shell of a merchant freighter—rolled away from the

sides of the vessel, revealing the snouts of gleaming atomic cannons. The hatch covers rolled away, exposing electra-cannons on the deck, with men ready to man them!

But the captain was pointing to the bow of the ship. A red pennant—the flaming, lush banner of Mars—was hauled to the stub mast while the Junovian pennant slid slowly downward.

Herrick swung to the Martian captain.

"You win," he grated.

The big captain nodded.

"Of course I win. Please vizagram your ship to stand by for surrender. Otherwise I'll be forced to blow the *Astera* to bits."

Herrick could picture the confusion, the sickening consternation that was probably rampant on the decks of the *Astera* at this moment. And he felt miserably, hideously ashamed of himself for having been so duped. The men wouldn't open fire on this Martian vessel until he and Roberts were no longer aboard, or until the Martian captain fired first. And he knew that resistance on the part of the *Astera,* which didn't have the guns or the size to compare with this "Q" ship of space, would be futile and tragic.

The Martian captain was right. His vessel could blow the *Astera* out of the void in less than a quarter-hour. Herrick could feel Roberts looking at him, waiting his reply.

HERRICK stepped over to the vizagram panel, and switched it from "message" to "vizascreen." He could see young Maloney's face, white and startled, come onto the screen. He knew that the lad had been standing by, while the *Astera* waited for explanation.

"Maloney," Herrick said huskily. "We've fallen into the hands of the enemy. Relay my orders to the Third Officer. Tell him to show no resistance."

The Martian captain was right at Herrick's shoulder.

"A boarding party will commandeer the *Astera* inside of another ten minutes," he said.

Herrick hesitated, flushed with shame, choking on the words. But he managed.

"A boarding party, the enemy's, will arrive to take over shortly," he said. Then, lips compressed, he snapped off the screen switch.

"Thank you, Officer Herrick," the Martian captain smiled. "I will permit you to return to your vessel with the men of my boarding party. In fact, I'll accompany the party myself."

Herrick didn't answer. He was thinking: *My first command. This is what happened to my first command. What a fine smear for my record. What a rotten blot on the name of Herrick! Captured—without having been able to fire a shot in our defense!*

The Martian crewmen with the electric pistols were prodding Herrick and Roberts toward the duralloy ladderway that led down from the second bridge to the deck.

The Martian captain walked behind them.

"You can send the crews of your lifecraft back to the *Astera,* Officer Herrick. I'll see to it that our own crews take you safely aboard your vessel."

Herrick flushed. The Martian captain probably realized that he might choose to make a fight of it if he got back to his command unguarded. Roberts must have been contemplating this, too, for the stocky second officer groaned aloud.

"Take it easy, Jon," Herrick said softly. "This isn't all over yet." But in his heart he knew the forced brag-

gadocio behind his words . . .

WHEN Herrick stood on the bridge of the *Astera* some ten minutes later, it was with two Martians behind him, their electric pistols pressed into his back. The Martian captain had accompanied the boarding party aboard the *Astera,* and while Herrick's face burned with shame, the Martians had taken over the ship.

Martians now stood beside each of the nine atomic cannons, having displaced the bewildered gunners of the *Astera's* crew. The vessel was quite completely in enemy hands.

"Fine," said the Martian captain. "This is q u i t e satisfactory, Officer Herrick."

"What do you intend to do with the *Astera?*" Herrick demanded.

The captain favored the young officer with one of his silken smiles.

"I am going to keep the *Astera* just as she is," he announced, "until the rest of my plans are completed."

Herrick frowned.

The captain explained. "When your vizagraph operator picked up our distress signals it was not as we had intended it."

"I still don't get you," Herrick said.

"We had no idea that the *Astera* would be patroling this particular space area at the time we sent out our decoy distress signal. We had hoped to draw bigger game—game we knew to be in this locality—into our nets," the Martian captain declared.

"You can't mean—" Herrick began.

"Yes," the captain nodded. "We were after the only other Earth Federation battlecraft in this locality. We were after the gigantic battlewagon, F.S.S. *New York,* the flagship of the Fourth Battle Fleet, commanded by your father, Admiral Herrick!"

Herrick grinned mirthlessly.

"You're crazy," he said quietly. "The *New York* could crush you with her forward guns alone."

The Captain smiled again.

"You forget the fact that we are a, ah, freighting vessel. Or so, at least, it will seem to the officers of the *New York* when they come to our aid."

Herrick shook his head.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "But one blast from your atomic cannons would be your undoing. The *New York* isn't as scantily armed, or as small, as the *Astera.* The *New York* is e v e n a damned s i g h t larger than your 'Q' ship."

"Our information sources are always excellent," said the Martian captain. "They tipped us off that the *New York* was going to be in this particular space zone, and they also gave us the exact location of that space battleship's atomic magazine chambers!"

Herrick turned white at the corners of his mouth. He looked at the Martian captain in open horror.

The captain chuckled.

"Now you understand, I see. One shot at their magazine will blast the *New York* into fragments. Even if we only cripple the *New York* badly by that one shot, our 'Q' ship is exceedingly fast, and prepared to run for it."

"And now," Herrick was forcing himself to speak, forcing himself to stall as long as he could, "that the *Astera* botched up your plans by answering the distress signal intended for the *New York,* just how do you intend to get my father's battleship here?"

The Martian captain s p r e a d his hands easily.

"It is a simple matter," he stated. "I am going to instruct you to send out a message to the *New York,* directly from the vizagraph room of the *Astera,* asking for additional aid to our, ah, poor, helpless Junovian freighter."

"That's ridiculous!" Herrick blazed.

"What have you to say about it?" the captain smiled. "Our men are in control of the *Astera* completely. Really, Captain Herrick, I don't think you fully appreciate the embarrassment of your position."

"You damned rott—" Herrick began in sudden blazing wrath.

The captain stepped in quickly and caught him an open-handed blow across the face. Then Herrick's rage exploded into a furious flashing ball of flame. He leaped forward, reaching for the Martian's throat. Something crashed into the back of his skull, and a thousand dancing sparks pinwheeled around in his b r a i n as blackness covered him . . .

SOMEONE was jerking Herrick roughly to his feet, slapping his face briskly in an effort to bring him back to consciousness.

Herrick opened his eyes dazedly. He was staring into the face of the Martian captain.

"Sorry I lost my temper, Officer Herrick," the Martian smiled. "One of my stupid crew bashed you on the back of the skull. It was thoughtless of him, I assure you."

Looking down, Herrick saw that Jon Roberts lay in a small pool of blood on the bridge deck in the corner. His white tunic was stained with the crimson that ringed his head.

The Martian captain jerked a thumb toward Roberts. "He's not dead," he remarked. "My men were even rougher with him when he tried to aid you in your stupid attack on me."

Herrick fought back a wild impulse to strike out again, for he knew it would be futile. He licked the blood away from his lips.

"During your, ah, slumbers, Officer Herrick," the captain was saying, "I took it upon myself to search through your vizagraph log. The messages contained there were exceptionally interesting. The last message, particularly. I believe you are to be congratulated." He held forth a sheet of electrotyped vizagraph message.

Dazedly, Herrick took it. His eyes scanned it, unseeing.

"Evidently you are the father of triplets, Officer Herrick. My congratulations to you and your wife. A pity that you can't be with her."

Herrick could only blink, and he fastened his gaze on the message again. The words jumped on the page, but they were clear enough to read.

"Communication from doctor to Officer Herrick. Delivery quite successful. Myra has the honor of being the mother of three babies. Congratulations. Myra doing fine."

Herrick looked up at the Martian captain again, his jaw still agape, his face a picture of turbulent emotional stress.

The captain had another sheet of paper in his hand. Vaguely, Herrick was aware that it was the message of inquiry about Myra which he'd received from his father, Admiral Herrick, earlier in the day.

"Undoubtedly the admiral of the Fourth Battle Fleet will be more than delighted to know that he is the grandfather of triplets," the Martian smiled. "You Earthmen are always vitally concerned with family matters, even when on battle duty."

Herrick was still unable to say a word. He was licking the dried blood on his lips and r u b b i n g his jaw bewilderedly.

Again the same derisive smile was on the Martian captain's face.

"I can understand your shock, Officer Herrick. Coming at a time like this, especially. However, it should be

more incentive for you to stay alive and refrain from, ah, foolish and glamorous gestures. It would be too bad to have those small little tots left fatherless so soon, eh?"

Herrick's jaw was grim, and he glared hotly at the Martian captain.

"You'll regret this," he blazed. "You'll regret this in Hell!"

The Martian captain revealed his white teeth in a mocking grin.

"Perhaps. However, we have work to do, Officer Herrick. I want you to send a vizagraph to your father's ship, the *New York*. I want you to tell him that you are standing by a distressed Junovian freighter, badly in need of aid, and that additional assistance from his ship is absolutely vital."

"Go to hell," Herrick said evenly.

"You forget the situation," the Martian captain said ominously. "It would be wise to do as I say. For the sake of your newly born infants, if not for yourself."

HERRICK seemed to waver for the slightest instant. Then, slowly, he said:

"It won't do you any good. Such a message could come from any ship anywhere in this area of space. The *New York* wouldn't fall into such a lure."

"You will send the message personally," the Martian captain said evenly. "And to add complete authenticity to it, you will mention the fact that your father is now a grandfather. When Admiral Herrick learns that you are the father of triplets he will certainly know the message to be authentic."

Herrick glared indecisively.

"You are in no position to refuse," the Martian captain reminded him.

Herrick's shoulders suddenly slumped.

"Very well," he mumbled. The life and spirit of the young officer seemed to be crushed completely from him. It was as if he'd surrendered to circumstances that were too great for any one man to overcome.

The Martian captain pointed to the message table on the bridge.

"You can compose your message there," he ordered. "Give your position, explain that additional aid is needed immediately, and add that very personal touch."

Herrick sat down before the message table. He began to write slowly. He tore up one sheet of paper and started again. This time his words were faster, more certain. He stood up, finished, and handed the sheet to the Martian captain.

The Martian captain read the message, nodding.

"Good, position is correct. Appeal for additional help is quite convincing. And that last, 'Myra has had triplets. You are a grandfather! Congratulations,' is quite authentically appealing." He smiled, handing the sheet to one of his men. "Have our vizagraph operator send this on the *Astera's* machine immediately," he ordered.

The Martian orderly was at the door of the bridge when the captain stopped him.

"A moment," he said. "Have the operator signal our 'Q' ship to raise the decoy superstructure again. Tell them not to forget to fly the Junovian ensign."

The orderly was gone, and the Martian captain turned to young Herrick.

"In another few moments your father's vessel will be heading full rockets into our trap, and the 'Q' ship will once again look like a dirty tramp space freighter."

Herrick said nothing. He was slumped against the back bulkhead of the bridge.

"Why, Officer Herrick," the Martian captain mocked, "you look ill."

Which description fitted young Herrick perfectly . . .

AT precisely eleven-eleven, interplanetary time, some six hours after the message had been sent from the *Astera*, the great space battlewagon, *F.S.S. New York* came majestically into view of the vizascreens of both the *Astera* and the ominously waiting "Q" ship.

Junior Officer Herrick stood on the bridge of the *Astera*, beside a bandaged and still somewhat bloody Jon Roberts. The two young officers were wordlessly watching the exultation that flooded the features of the Martian captain who stood before the screen.

"She comes," said the captain, turning from the screen. "And so unsuspecting!"

Herrick looked at Roberts, and there was something unfathomable in the glances they exchanged.

"It is a pity," added the Martian captain regretfully, "t h a t my men weren't experienced enough with the guns on the *Astera* to turn them against the *New York*. That would have been delightful additional irony."

Herrick wet his lips.

"So delightful," he mimicked dryly.

The Martian captain disregarded this.

"Five minutes more and they will be in range for the shot at their magazine," he said eagerly.

Jon Roberts nudged Herrick slightly, pointing with his eyes at the picture of the *New York* in the vizascreen. The great long range atomic guns on that battlewagon were being elevated into firing position. Something which apparently escaped the attention of the excited Martian "Q" ship captain.

"Four minutes," the Martian captain said.

The guns of the battlewagon *New York* moved slightly right and slightly left, almost imperceptibly. This time Herrick nudged Roberts. His throat felt stuffed with cotton. His heart hammered wildly.

"Three minutes," said the Martian captain.

And then the vizascreen was obliterated by the orange bursts which issued from the vessel pictured on it. Orange bursts puffing from atomic long range cannons.

The atomic bolts were flashing overhead in the next instant. Shooting overhead as a terrific explosion occurred five hundred yards off from the *Astera* and the "Q" ship rocked like a leaf in a gale. The *New York*, firing before the Martian decoy vessel could get range, had scored five direct hits on the target!

And Herrick and Roberts were diving toward the Martian captain and his two orderlies at the same instant.

Herrick got the captain, his shoulder crashing into the bewildered fellow's legs, spilling him back against the solid duralloy surface of the bridge bulkhead. The captain went limp in his arms, out cold.

Then Herrick was on his feet, while more atomic shell bursts plunged into the "Q" ship, jumping into Roberts' battle with the two orderlies. It was short work before those two were quite willing to quit.

Junior Officers Herrick and Roberts had regained mastery of the *Astera's* bridge.

And now, looking out across the intervening distance between the *Astera* and the "Q" ship, Herrick could see that the *New York's* long range cannon had made short work of the Martian decoy craft. The situation was very well in hand, even to the fighting

down on the decks of the *Astera* itself, where the *Astera's* officers and crew—realizing that the *New York* had rescued them—were mopping up on the Martians who'd been left to guard them.

Junior Officer Herrick grinned with honest pride at the spirit of his men. He threw an arm around his second-in-command's plump shoulder and watched the final rout . . .

THE job of questioning the Martian captives fell to young Junior Officer Herrick, after the remnants of the charred "Q" ship were searched and the survivors removed.

Particularly interesting to young Herrick was his conversation in the brig with the Martian captain, whose only wound of the route was a severe bump on the back of his black-headed skull.

And when Herrick had drained what information he could from the enemy captain, that worthy had a few pained questions to put to his inquisitor.

"How," he moaned feebly, "did your father realize that something out of the ordinary was going on in respect to the *Astera?* That message left no cause for doubt on his part. Especially—"

Herrick cut in, grinning widely. This was going to be enjoyable.

"When you discovered the correspondence between my father and I concerning Myra and the fact that she was about to give birth—and when you found the communication from the doctor stating she'd had triplets, you couldn't be blamed for jumping at the conclusions you did. So I let you go right ahead."

"But—" began the Martian captain.

"In the message," Herrick cut in again, "I congratulated my father on being a grandfather, adding that Myra had had triplets."

"But how could your wife's having tr—" the Martian captain began again.

Again Herrick cut him off.

"Although my father was very much concerned over Myra's condition," he said, "that didn't mean that Myra was my wife. As a matter of fact, *everyone* was concerned over Myra's condition. You see, Myra is a Cheshire cat. Myra is, in fact, the beloved mascot of the Fourth Battle Fleet. You couldn't blame any admiral for being suspicious when he's accused in an official dispatch of being the grandfather of three kittens!"

(The End)

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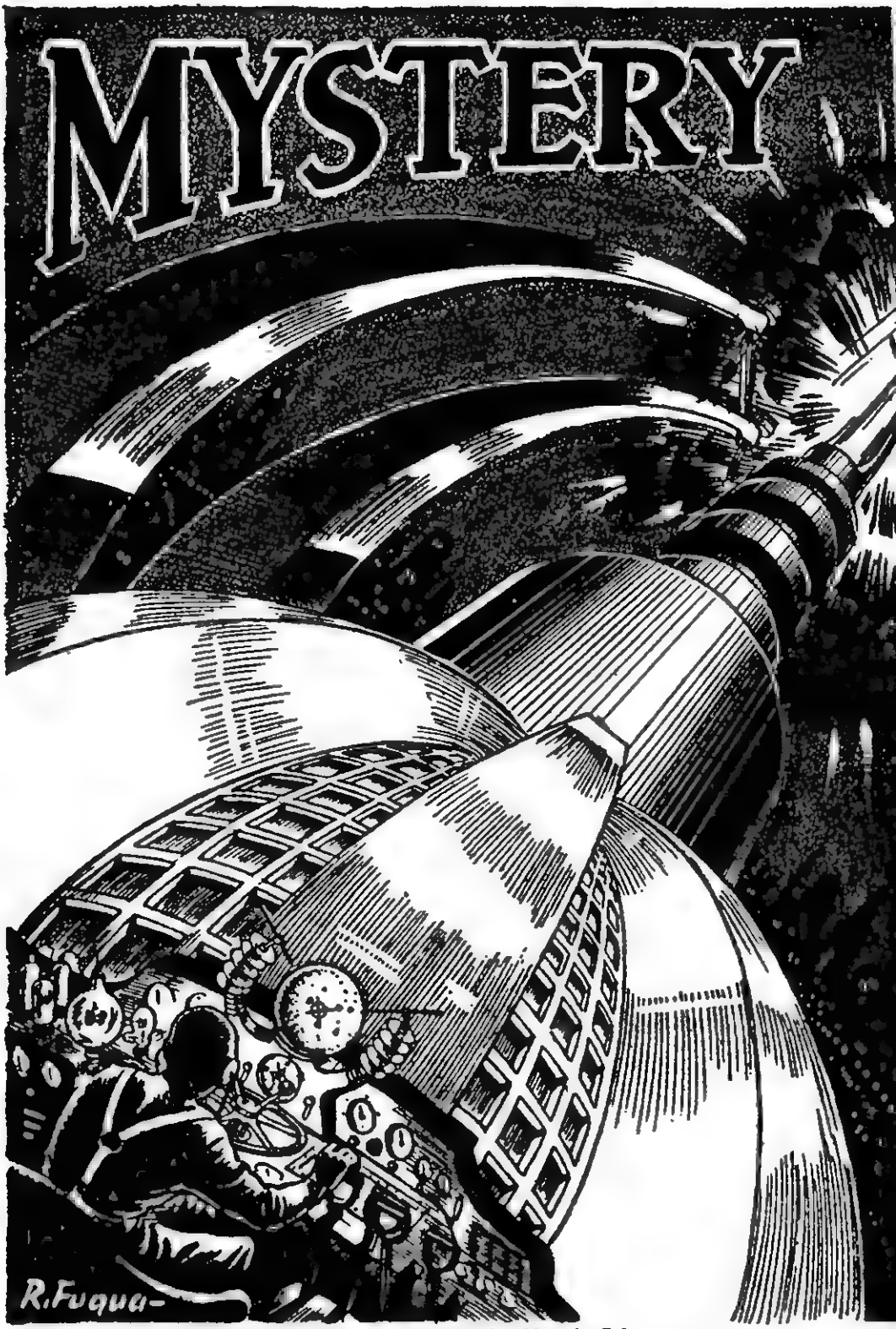

The attendant pulled the lever and the ship blasted off into space

ON BASE TEN

by William P. McGivern

Veya Mallon knew her father wasn't a traitor, so she blasted spaceward to prove it—right into a hornet's nest of conspirators

THERE was a tense, painful silence in the chromium and duraglass office as Space Commander Wilson finally glanced up from the reports which littered his metal desk.

His eyes shifted from the tall, blonde, red-tuniced lieutenant who stood at attention before his desk, to the small lovely girl who was seated on the edge of a steel chair, hands clenched anxiously.

His kindly, deeply lined face softened in unspoken sympathy as he dropped his gaze back to the papers spread before him.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Mallon," he said quietly, "but there is nothing in the official report to substantiate your claim. Believe me, I'm as anxious as you are to clear your father's name. Unfortunately, the facts point conclusively to his guilt. It is impossible to change the verdict on the strength of your suspicions."

Veya Mallon sprang to her feet angrily, every line of her slim, supple body expressing her emotion.

"Oh how can I make you see that you are being very unfair!" she cried. "You know—you *must* know, that he wasn't a traitor. He just couldn't be. And yet you don't raise a finger to try to find some evidence that will clear his name."

She paused a moment, bit her lip, then went on.

"My father was killed," she said bitterly, "because the information he possessed would have incriminated some Earth officer as a traitor. For that reason he was murdered. Papers were planted on him to make it look as if he were in the pay of the Martian Federation. On his last trip to Base Ten he discovered the information he had been tracking down for years. But

before he could get back to Earth, he was killed. The story about him running from a Martian ship and being killed in the battle is an out-and-out lie. You knew my father, Commander Wilson. He never ran from an enemy ship in his life."

Wilson passed a hand wearily over his tired eyes.

"Veya, my dear," he said huskily, "your father was my closest friend. I knew him as a courageous space fighter, without an ounce of fear in his makeup. But from all the evidence, it is dead certain that he *did* run from the Martian ship on his last flight. Undoubtedly he did so rather than risk a general battle that might attract other of our space fighters to the scene. Since he was carrying enemy instructions on his person at the time, he couldn't risk any chance of detection from our force.

"As much as I wished it were otherwise, the facts are definite. I have checked and rechecked them personally. There is no possibility of any mistake. Your father was in the pay of Mars, a traitor to Earth. Ironically enough, he was killed running from a Martian ship. I'm sorry, my dear, but that is the final verdict."

Veya Mallon turned appealing eyes to the tall lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Vickers," she said imploringly. "Couldn't you have made a mistake, somehow, somewhere? Couldn't it have been some other ship you saw running before the Martian cruiser?"

Lieutenant Vickers' boyish face twisted miserably.

"I wish I were mistaken, Vey—Miss Mallon," he said steadily. "But when the two ships flashed past my visi-screen I had a side-on view of your father's ship and the markings were unmistakable. I started after them, but it was twenty minutes before I sighted either ship again. Then it was your father's, drifting out of control. I boarded his ship and found him lying dead. In his uniform pocket were the papers from the Martian Federation. It was my duty to turn them in, and I did."

VEYA MALLON'S pale features hardened. Her dark eyes flashed angrily at the two men.

"My father was not a coward or a traitor," she cried desperately. "I know that and so do both of you. But still you'll stand by and see his name dishonored because you're afraid to dig into the rotten mess that caused his death. Well, I'm not afraid. I'm going to shout his innocence so loud that someone will have to listen to me. And before I'm through I'll find out who framed him and killed him. I'll do that, even if it means my own life."

Trembling with anger Veya spun on her heel and started for the door.

Lieutenant Vickers moved to intercept her.

"Veya," he said pleadingly, "please listen—"

Veya Mallon jerked a small diamond ring from her finger and dropped it at his feet.

"Please don't speak to me again," she said.

Then she stepped through the door.

Lieutenant Tom Vickers stood still for a silent instant, the blood draining from his face. Then he stooped slowly and picked up the ring from the floor and stared at it dazedly.

"I'm sorry, son," Commander Wilson said kindly. "All of this has been a terrible strain on Veya and you must be patient with her. She's overwrought, nervous, emotionally shocked by her father's death. Time is the only thing that will help her."

Tom Vickers stared blindly at the

ring in his hands.

"Th-thanks, sir," he said brokenly. "But I'm afraid the only thing that will ever change Veya is the exoneration of her father's name. And that's impossible. I hated to testify as I did, but it was the only course open to me. I've wished a thousand times that I might have been looking the other way when his ship flashed across my screen, but I wasn't."

Commander Wilson nodded slowly.

"It's hard on you, boy," he said quietly, "but you must try and make her understand your position in the affair. And it might be a good idea if you'd attempt to convince her that her father actually was guilty. As hard as that will be for her to accept, it will be easier for her in the long run to realize that he *was* guilty. Then she can adjust herself to the facts and try and forget them. Her present resentful attitude will only make her more miserable, more sensitive and nervous."

"I'll do what I can," Vickers said shrugging, "but I'm afraid I'll get nowhere. For the past week I've tried to reason with her, but that only seems to make her more determined that he wasn't guilty."

Commander Wilson looked thoughtful.

"In that case," he said, "it might be best not to antagonize her by further efforts to prove her father's guilt. I think it would be best if we say nothing more to her on the subject. She has made up her mind. We can't change it. She'll have to do that herself."

"Yes, sir," Vickers said. "If you don't need me any more, Commander, I'd like a forty-eight hours' leave to sort of straighten myself out again."

"Certainly, my boy," Commander Wilson said heartily. "Take all the time you want. When you feel right, come back. Not before."

Vickers thanked him and left the office.

OUTSIDE he stared unseeingly at the vast, sprawling space field, with its dozens of mooring towers and expulsion tubes, repair pits and checking offices. Freight, atomically condensed, was rolling into the holds of the mighty freight cruisers to be carried to the farthest limits of the solar system. Fighting and scout ships were hissing into the void from expulsion tubes every minute or so, blasting through the cold darkness of space to their allotted lanes and schedules. Everything was orderly confusion and efficient speed.

Vickers had grown up with scenes like this before him, almost a part of his own nature. Something he loved with an affection that was as vast as the void. But now it soured in his mouth. Everything, somehow, had lost its meaning, when Veya had dropped his ring contemptuously at his feet.

He realized that all he had worked for had been for her benefit. With her, everything and anything had been glorious. Without her, it was all pointless and futile.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

He turned and walked moodily along the ramp until he reached the small office that recorded the movement of ships in and out of the vast terminal. A small, fussy-looking man in the doorway saw him and waved.

"Want to see you," the little man said. "Veya Mallon just left from tube 22 in your single-seater. Said you said it was all right. Irregular as the very devil, but I let her go. Want you to sign a clearance form for your ship."

"Veya Mallon," Vickers said unbelievingly. "You say she left in *my*

ship?"

"That's right," the little man snapped. "Anything wrong with that? I knowed you two was practically one. Didn't bother to check with you."

"It's okay," Vickers said, and signed the clearance form. "Did you say tube 22?"

"Yep. She arced out not more than a minute ago."

Worried, Vickers hurried along the ramp until he reached the conical base of expulsion tube 22. He couldn't imagine why Veya had taken his ship. Feeling as she did about him, it wasn't logical. But maybe it was the only way she *could* get a ship. He knew she didn't have one of her own. But what destination was so important to her, that she had to practically steal a ship to get there. That was what worried him.

He grabbed the first rocket man he bumped into.

"Were you here when Miss Mallon left?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," the mechanic replied, stiffening to attention. "She just left, Lieutenant. She took a course twenty-two degrees off normal arc using full power. Destination Interplanetary Base Ten."

Base Ten! That was the base which had figured so prominently in the testimony against Veya's father. He had been reported leaving Base Ten when the Martian raider caught him. Veya had said repeatedly that it was on Base Ten that her father had discovered the plot against Earth. According to Veya the evidence proved that several Earth officers were involved in the conspiracy.

Base Ten was a dangerous hell-hole, rotten with intrigue and espionage, and no place at all for a hot-headed young girl. Interplanetary law kept it open as a free base between Mars and Earth and it had become a cauldron of trouble, harboring the suspicious characters of both planets and offering a fertile field to free-lance agents from the other members of the solar system. If Veya was heading for Base Ten, she was heading for trouble.

"Anything wrong, Lieutenant?" the mechanic asked respectfully.

"I hope not," Vickers answered. "I'll be back in about ten minutes, and I'll need a ship ready to go. Set it for Base Ten and have it sparking when I return."

The mechanic jumped to his job, and Vickers wheeled and headed for Commander Wilson's office. He entered without knocking.

COMMANDER Wilson looked up, surprised, as Vickers barged in.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"Veya Mallon has just left for Base Ten," Vickers replied. "She took my ship, evidently with some idea of discovering proof of her father's innocence there. I'd like your permission, sir, to follow her and see that she isn't involved in any trouble. Base Ten is a dangerous spot for a young girl with ideas like Veya's in her head. I feel, somehow, responsible for her safety."

Commander Wilson stood up and ran a hand through his graying hair. He walked to the huge side window of his office and stared worriedly over the sprawling space field.

"Base Ten, eh?" he muttered irritably. "Silly girl should have had better sense than to head there."

"Then it's all right with you, sir, if I leave immediately?"

Commander Wilson turned from the window, tugging anxiously at his lower lip.

"Vickers," he said gravely, "I cannot grant you permission to follow Veya Mallon. We need you here, on hand for any emergency that might develop. While I think a great deal

of Veya myself, we can't let ourselves forget that our duty is here, not on Base Ten. If I could spare you, I'd stretch a point. But as it is, your request is impossible. If our space pilots were at liberty to chase about the void on personal matters, what kind of a fleet do you think we'd have? With Mars waiting to strike at any opening we leave, we can't take the chances of weakening any defensive line."

"But what about Veya?" Vickers exploded. "With the information she had about Earth defenses, she'd be a ripe plum to fall into the hands of Martian agents on Ten."

"We'll have to take that chance," Commander Wilson said quietly. "Earth cannot spare space pilots, Lieutenant Vickers."

Vickers felt a hot flood of anger rushing through him. Maybe it was illogical and inconsistent, but he knew, somehow, that Veya would need him on Base Ten. The thought of her in trouble, while he was twiddling his thumbs on Earth, was too much for him.

"Commander Wilson," he barked. "I'm going to Ten. Call it a hunch or something equally silly, but I feel my job is there."

Commander Wilson's features hardened into stern lines.

"I gave you an order, Lieutenant Vickers," he said, "and I intend that it be obeyed. If you leave this space field for Base Ten I will flash orders to our fighter ships to blast you out of the void on sight! You are dismissed."

A reckless fury was churning Vickers now, tipping the scales of caution and judgment in his mind.

"Send your order," he snapped. "But it will take more than a fleet of fighting ships to stop me from getting to Ten."

He turned and sprang to the door.

"Stop!" Commander Wilson thundered. His hands dug for the service electron gun at his waist, but the door had banged shut behind Vickers before he could clear it from the holster.

He stepped quickly to a tele-screen.

VICKERS reached expulsion tube 22 in a half-minute of furious running. The mechanic was waiting for him.

"Everything's ready, sir," he snapped. "All rockets firing at point two, course set dead for Base Ten."

"Fine," Vickers said breathlessly. "Shove the firing pin the minute I seal the hatch. I'm in a helluva hurry."

He clambered up the narrow iron steps to the square platform of the expulsion tube. Opening the hatch of the trim single-seater set in the chamber of the tube, he was halfway into the ship when he heard the sudden shout below and behind him.

Glancing back he saw a half-dozen land soldiers racing along the ramp toward him. One of them, a sergeant in the lead, was shouting at the top of his voice to the mechanic, who was standing before the control panel of the expulsion tube.

"Shove that pin!" Vickers yelled.

The mechanic paused indecisively, looking from the rapidly approaching soldiers up to Vickers.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," he said worriedly, "but there seems to be something wrong. I'd better wait and—"

"Do as you're told!" Vickers roared. "Shove that pin!"

His voice acted as a stimulant to the hesitating mechanic.

"Right, sir," he snapped briskly. His hand slapped the firing pin into position at the same instant that Vickers ducked into the ship and banged the hatch shut.

With a rushing roar the slim single-seater flashed out of the tube and disappeared into the void, trailing sparks the indication of its swift cleavage of Earth's atmosphere.

Inside the bullet-like, rocketing ship, Vickers seated himself at the controls and breathed a sigh of relief. A tenth of a second delay then, and he would have been in the hands of Wilson's land soldiers. He checked the controls with a quick, practised eye, glanced at the wide visi-screen, and then settled down for the long trip to Base Ten. He realized with sharp clarity that his actions would break him forever with the Earth space fleet, but he forced this thought from his mind. The only thing he wanted to think of now was Veya. As long as she was safe, everything else was all right. If she wasn't— He hunched his big shoulders forward, and jammed the auxiliary rocket lever into place. Under this emergency power the flashing ship shot ahead with a spine-jarring spurt . . .

TWENTY-THREE hours later, Vickers moored at Base Ten. The red-and-gold insignia on the cowling of his ship gave him mooring preference over the pleasure and commercial ships which were waiting.

When he climbed out of his ship and descended the ladder, two officers of the Base were waiting for him.

For an instant a cold hand of fear closed over his stomach. If Commander Wilson had flashed a message to the base headquarters, it would be all over with him now.

"Welcome, Lieutenant," one of them said cordially. "Any special reason for the visit, or are you just gallivanting around for the fun of it?"

"Hardly," Vickers said easily. He was almost trembling with relief, but he forced his voice to disguise his emotion. "Just a routine trip. You haven't heard from Commander Wilson lately, have you?" he asked, as casually as he could.

The senior officer, a red-faced, stocky, second lieutenant, shook his head.

"Not a word for the last two days. Suits us here. The quieter things are, the better we like it," he smiled.

Vickers smiled too. So far he still had a free hand.

"By the way," he asked, "has Miss Veya Mallon moored here today? I think she was expected up this way."

The second lieutenant nodded.

"She pulled in about six minutes ahead of you, Lieutenant. Too bad that a nice kid like that should have a father who'd sell out to the enemy."

"Which way did she go?" Vickers asked, trying to cloak his impatience.

The red-faced junior officer pondered.

"I was standing here," he said, scratching his head, "when she walked by me from the other mooring tower. I think a couple of guys met her, and she left with them."

"Did you know them?" Vickers asked quickly.

The officer shook his head.

"There's too many bums here on Ten for me to remember all of them. But I think I saw one of the fellows hanging around the Interplanetary Hotel a few nights ago, but I can't be sure. Every double-crossing saboteur and spy in the business hangs out there. It'll be a fine day when we clean that place out for good."

"The Interplanetary Hotel," Vickers murmured. "That's third layer, south, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Why? You interested in somebody over there?"

"I might be," Vickers said grimly.

"I just might be."

He nodded to the two officers and started off. They saluted as he passed them and strode down the ramp to the exit gates of the space field.

WHEN he reached the Interplanetary Hotel an hour or so later, he ordered a drink of Saturn squeelah,* and did a bit of serious thinking.

The officer had been sure that Veya had been met at the space field. No one could have known she was coming, but still, somehow, someone had managed to pick up the information and meet her as she arrived.

A worried frown cut a furrow across his brow.

There was no doubt in his mind that Veya had stumbled into something dangerous. The men who met her obviously would lull her suspicions with some plausible story until she was too deep to turn back. Why she had been picked up was a question he couldn't readily answer. Neither did he have any idea of *who* had ordered her met at the space field. But he was sure that they had met her for a reason, and it was a million to one that that reason would explain a lot of the peculiar questions which were bothering him.

He finished his drink and was turning from the automatic liquor dispensary when he saw a small, swarthy man hurrying past him, holding a handkerchief to his cheek. The man crossed the side foyer and disappeared through a small door that led, Vickers knew, to a first aid station.

Curious, Vickers waited until the man reappeared. There was a strange tingling sensation at the base of his spine as he saw the long, thin scratch that ran down the man's cheek.

For a brief second he hesitated as the somberly dressed, swarthy man hurried back across the foyer and made for the elatubes. Then he turned and ambled carelessly after him. But when he reached the elatube the door had already clicked and the car had rocketed upward on its mile flight.

Vickers waited impatiently for the car to return. Some sixth sense harried him, raised the hackles at the base of his neck. There seemed to be some vague pattern to everything that had happened, but the exact design of it eluded him. He felt as if he were in a labyrinth of strange motives and actions, and if he could find the right path to follow it would lead directly to the heart of the puzzle.

And it was a puzzle. He appreciated that with greater force as each instant slipped past. Looking back he could see the puzzle. But he knew he would have to look forward and move forward to find the key.

When the elatube car returned he called the operator to him.

"A friend of mine got into your car, but the door closed before I could hail him," he said easily. "I wonder if you remember what level he got off on? He was a small fellow with a sallow complexion and a fresh scar on his cheek. Remember him?"

The elatube operator scratched his head, then nodded.

"Got off on the sixth level, twentieth floor. Seemed kind of mad about something. I guess he's the one you mean."

Vickers thanked him and stepped into the elatube car.

"Sixth level," he said, "twentieth floor. I think I'll surprise my friend."

THE elatube operator set the controls and the car ascended swiftly.

* *Squeelah*—a potent drink fermented from the carnivorous plant forms that exist in great abundance on the dank planet of Saturn. It is green in color, bittersweet in taste and TNT if imbibed in quantity.—Ed.

It covered the trip in a half a minute. Vickers stepped out of the car and moved down the wide aluminum corridor, glancing at the doors on either side of him.

Within a dozen feet he stopped. He had no way of knowing what room the swarthy man occupied. It would have to be discovered by trial and error.

He selected a door and knocked sharply.

A middle-aged woman answered.

"I'm looking for my two friends," Vickers explained to her questioning look. "But I don't have their room number. I thought perhaps I could save myself a trip back down to the desk by inquiring for them. One of them is small and dark with short, black hair and narrow eyes. Do you remember anyone like that on this floor?"

The woman jerked a thumb to her right.

"Down two doors from me," she said ungraciously. "And tell 'em not to be making such a fuss. A hour or so ago you'd think they was staging a wrassling match in there."

Vickers hands clenched.

"Thanks," he snapped. There was a tight feeling across his shoulders as he strode down the corridor past one door and stopped at the next.

He knew there was no time for anything but direct action. He pounded on the door with the heavy palm of his hand.

There was a complete silence inside the room for almost a minute, then Vickers heard cautious footsteps approaching the door. A bolt clicked and the door opened a few inches.

Vickers stared through the crack and recognized the swarthy man he had followed from the foyer peering out at him.

"Whadda you want?" the swarthy man growled. But Vickers noticed his beady eyes moving furtively over the red tunic of the Earth space fleet he was wearing.

"I want in," Vickers snapped. He placed his palm against the door and shoved hard. The door swung inward under his weight and the swarthy little man flew backward almost sprawling to the floor.

"What's the idea?" he panted fearfully.

Vickers shot a quick glance about the room. Another man was rising from a chair, a look of mingled surprise and fear stamped on his face. There was no one else in the luxuriously furnished room.

"I just have a few questions I want answered," he said softly. "First of all where did you get that scratch on your face?"

"What business is it of yours?" the swarthy man snarled.

"Maybe none," Vickers said, still quietly. "But it might be just my business. If you'd rather talk without your front teeth just keep stalling."

"I fell," the swarthy man said surlily. "My face got scraped on the edge of a chair. Anything else you want to know?"

"Yes," Vickers said. "Just one thing more. Where is Veya Mallon?"

THE words had hardly left his mouth before he knew they had scored. Both men started convulsively, then their hands dug frantically for their pockets.

Vickers sprang forward, his right fist smashing into the swarthy man's face with the force of a pile-driver. The man went flying backward, his face broken beyond recognition by the power of the sledge-hammer punch. He crashed to the floor, twitched once and was still.

Vickers wheeled and charged for the other man, whose electron gun was just clearing his pocket. The gun exploded with a vicious *hiss* as Vickers' heavy shoulder slammed into the man's stomach.

The force of his tackle hurled the man backward into the wall. His head snapped into its steel-hard surface with a sickening crunch. The gun slipped from nerveless fingers as the man doubled and dropped to the floor, a soggy red ooze plastering the back of his head.

Vickers scrambled to his feet and strode to the closet. The door was bolted, but he snapped the lock with a powerful drive of his shoulders. The door swung inward and Vickers heard an inarticulate moan from the darkness of the closet.

Dropping to his knees he found Veya's bound form doubled up in a corner. He lifted her in his arms and carried her carefully to the bed.

There was a nasty bruise on her pale forehead, but she was not unconscious. He ripped the gag from her mouth, with fingers that trembled with rage.

"I prayed you'd come,' she gasped weakly. "It was a trap, but I didn't realize it soon enough."

"Don't talk," Vickers said soothingly.

He untied the bonds from her wrists and ankles and then chafed her arms until the circulation was restored.

"Tom," Veya said faintly. "I've discovered everything I needed. In the drawer of the desk here are the papers that my father was bringing back to Earth when he was killed. That was why he was killed. Because of what those papers and documents would mean when they were presented on Earth."

Vickers stepped to the desk and opened the drawer. A folio of papers in a leather case was inside. He removed it and sat down again beside Veya.

For fifteen minutes he pored through the documents in the leather case, and when he finished there was an incredulous look on his face.

"It's positively incredible," he muttered. "Now I can see the whole scene. Your father discovered these and started back to Earth with them. The Martians discovered their absence and started after him. Your father decided to run for it, rather than fight, because he didn't want to take any chances with these documents in his possession. But they caught him, crippled his ship, boarded it and killed him. Then they recovered these papers and planted other ones on your father to make it look as if *he* were the traitor."

"It's all horribly clear," Veya said shuddering. "But why did they have to plant the other papers on him? He was dead and beyond hurting them then. They had these papers back in their possession. Why was it necessary to make him appear to be a traitor?"

"It was a devilishly clever move," Vickers said slowly, "to invalidate and discredit any of your father's papers which might subsequently have been brought to light. They didn't know but what he might have had other data and records of a damning nature hidden in his own files. If anything like that turned up they were prepared for it. Because a convicted traitor's records would have little or no weight in any military court. But these records in this leather case are absolutely conclusive. You're father's name will be cleared and the real traitor will face a firing squad."

"I don't think so!" a muffled voice said behind them.

VICKERS wheeled and saw a tall, masked figure standing in the doorway, an electron gun held unwaveringly in his hand. A black cloak completely concealed the masked man's body, down to the knees.

"Without those papers," the curiously muffled voice went on, "your case will be declared ridiculous. So I'll trouble you for the leather case."

"You can't get away with this," Vickers said bitterly.

"I'm the best judge of that," the muffled voice said mockingly.

Vickers stood up, the leather case in his hands. He stepped forward and extended the case to the masked figure, who reached for it avidly, his eyes glitteringly triumphantly behind the concealing mask.

His hand touched it, and at the same instant a spiteful *hiss* cracked through the room. The masked figure turned slowly and Vickers saw a round, black hole burned through the cloth of his cape, just below his heart. For an instant he staggered in the doorway and then he collapsed to the floor.

Vickers wheeled and saw Veya sitting up in bed, an electron gun clenched tightly in both her hands. Her face was white with horror.

"I did it," she whispered. "When he reached for the case he wasn't watching me. There was a gun lying on the floor. I picked it up and shot him."

"It's all right, honey," Vickers said tenderly. He put his arm around her shoulder and held her close to him. "He deserved it if any man ever did. He had your father murdered and framed to appear a traitor, while all the while he was directly in the pay of Mars, as these papers here prove beyond a doubt."

Vickers stood up and stepped to the masked figure, lying sprawled in death on the floor. Reaching down he ripped off the mask, exposing the face of the dead man.

It was Commander Wilson.

"I should have been suspicious," Vickers said, "when he refused to let me follow you here to Ten. When I left anyway, he flashed his agents here to meet and get rid of you. Then he followed himself to make sure that nothing slipped up. But everyone slips sometimes, and he was no exception. His death will clear your father's name."

"It's terrible," Veya said softly, "that any man could betray his own planet like that."

"The reward of the traitor is always death," Vickers said grimly.

"Not always," Veya said shyly. "I was a traitor to our love when I lost faith in you, wasn't I? And I'm still alive."

Vickers grinned and took her in his arms and kissed her emphatically.

"You missed the death sentence," he said, "but you're convicted to life imprisonment in my arms."

HOUR GLASS IN THE DESERT

IN PERU, mysterious country of the Incas, exists one peculiar phenomenon that is almost too amazing to be of natural origin. It is the famous walking half-moons of La Joya. These crescent-shaped sand dunes are about one hundred feet high and fifteen feet wide and they are of such exact and unvarying shape that no human agency could make them more perfect.

But scientists have determined that the constant, changeless winds that sweep these plateaus are responsible for these peculiar formations. The wind always blowing from one direction, sweeps the light colored sand up the convex side of the crescent, and from there it drifts down into the hollow side to form the mathematically perfect half moons. Furthermore these dunes creep across the desert with the regularity of a Swiss watch. Each year the constant wind moves them along an even fifty feet.

Thus by this natural phenomenon the years of ancient and inscrutable Peru are marked plainly and accurately, from Pizarro to the present. Hour glasses of sand, operated by nature!

Fessler Spaulding.

SCIENTIFIC SLEUTHING

By JOHN R. HOLMES

EVER since the invention of the Keeler Polygraph, commonly called the "lie detector," the newspaper-reading public has grown to think of it in vague terms of crime confession police work. In spite of the fact that the lie detector has been proven to work with an accuracy better than ninety percent, the general public still considers it a sort of unproven fad which surprisingly works to the solution of a crime now and then.

But the famous insurance house of Lloyd's of London doesn't see eye-to-eye with the public misconception of the lie detector's value. For it has been chiefly through the pressure of Lloyd's that the Keeler Polygraph is now widely used by banking and business houses.

For quite a while now some of the largest firms in the United States have been using the lie detector commercially. And through use of this machine business has profited immeasurably in protecting itself against embezzlements, mysterious inventory shrinkages, and petty larcenies.

When a vast chain store company tested all its employees not so very long ago—in order to track down serious and constant shortages in surplus materials—it was discovered that better than seventy-five percent of the employees in the firm were guilty of pilfering petty cash or small items of merchandise. But none of these were fired, for the test was given each employee with the understanding that he wouldn't be prosecuted for what was discovered *that* time, but that the findings of the *next* test, to be given six months from then, would be acted on immediately. When the test was given half a year later, petty thieving had dropped to a mere two percent!

It was against vast indignation and protestations of insulted employees that the lie detector was first inaugurated into business houses. Many of these protests were indubitably sincere, motivated by sheer indignation at being consider capable of criminal action. Some of course were prompted by guilt. However, it was pointed out to the employees that the use of the lie detector in firms would also be of advantage to innocent employees, by giving them a chance to clear themselves of any unfair charges brought against them. This proved to be quite true, since many thousands of employees have been saved from false and unfortunate suspicion through the use of the machines.

When Lloyd's of London first advised the use of lie detector on employees of firms they were about to insure, they started the ball rolling toward general adoption of this method. If a company used the detectors on its employees as Lloyd's suggested, it generally found that the famed London insurance house was only too glad to make substantial reductions in the premiums they'd have to pay for money loss insurance.

Now most large companies employing men and women who handle money constantly have adopted lie detectors as standard insurance against loss from sticky-fingered workers. Lawyers have even had their clients submit to lie detector tests before taking their cases. Many salesmen for diamond concerns, coin collectors, and cashiers are also similarly scientifically checked on by their employees. It's worth while.

Scientific

MEMBER OF THE "MIRU CLAN" OF THE **SPIDER TOTEM** PEOPLE. THESE MIRUS HAD STRANGE LIGHTS, KILLED AT A DISTANCE, FLEW IN AIRSHIPS, --AND WERE **TABU.**

THE **SPIDER TOTEM** CAME FIRST TO AMERICA ON AN ISLAND OFF PERU, WHERE **WOMEN WERE SACRIFICED** TO THE MOON GOD. THE CHIMUS CAME TO SOUTH AMERICA ABOUT 2000 B.C.

IN 1900, DR. A.J. EVANS DISCOVERED HUGE **LEAD-LINED JARS** AT KNOSSOS, CRETE - OBVIOUSLY FASHIONED BY FOLLOWERS OF THE **SPIDER TOTEM.**

Meet the Authors

Harry Bates

YE ED tells me Posterity wants my autobiography (and he cracks his whip. All right, I know when I'm down.)

I was born quite young in Pittsburgh and the first thing I did was yell in protest. Nobody understood, or cared. My second act was to put my foot in my mouth. At the time I did this because I was a born acrobat and it tasted good; but since then I have given the action a great deal of thought, and come to the opinion that it was also a double-barreled portent, straight from providence: first, an indication that I was always to be apt at this feat; and second, a sign that I was to make my way by some process of self-consumption, such as writing.

I was the darlingest baby—so they say. I remember how the women loved me. They'd bend over my crib, make the silliest faces, say the damndest things. I was pretty blooming fat. Later, when I was able to go from chair to chair, it was hard to tell whether I was walking or rolling.

Ah, happy days of my childhood!

I was moved to Philadelphia, and as my body elongated slowly in one dimension my mind ballooned rapidly all over the neighborhood. I passed through grammar school without a falter and in my thirteenth year stood composedly before the commencement audience and sang a powerful love song, to the surprise and edification of all. I also was class poet, and wrote the words for the class song (with *sub rosa* help from my mother. I won't say how much, but she seemed pleased.) I also was voted the *second* most popular boy in the class of thirty, and given an underslug briar pipe to prove it. Then, on to high school!

Ah, high school!

I slid through three more years there without a hitch, never bothering to take a book home, and always therefore carrying a five-hour (maximum) condition in the previous term's Latin, which condition, *mirabile visu*, I was always able to replace with a later one in time to go up with my class. (Latin is a stupid waste of time.) Three years of this, then, *horrible dictu*, I was flunked. Some lousy little one- or two-hour subject jumped on the back of my Latin, and together they brought me low. There I was, then, a failure at sixteen!

I had gotten to be a clockmaker and went to work full time in my father's factory. At seventeen I unobtrusively disattached myself from all that, taking in a big hurry an all-day local train to Pittsburgh (I didn't know there was such a thing as an express!) I had thirteen bucks; the fare was nine; and with the four I gathered myself together and started life anew, my motto, *Di omnia laboribus vendunt.*

I became in succession a tool grinder, a railroad fireman, and a lathe hand. Just before my eighteenth birthday I sneaked up to Erie, Pa., spent several hours in the library reviewing all my knowledge, then hurried down to Allegheny College, at Meadville, and took and passed the entrance exams. (It was quite fantastic; don't ask me to explain.) I entered with twenty-five bucks, and lost sixteen of it the first day in a crap game.

Ah, college!

Geeze, I'll have to be brief from here on; I didn't realize I had so much autobiography.

I waited table and was janitor of the physics building—the start of my career in science. After the first year's work I teamed up with several pals and went west for a year and sold stereo graphs and stereoscopes to half the farmers between Canada and Mexico.

At nineteen I returned to Philadelphia and my father's factory and entered the University of Pennsylvania. There one year, then got job as reporter. Quit that and with friends started a resort magazine at Ocean City, N.J., the "Beachcomber." Included stories under the name of Yvonne Eclair and handed out cockeyed love advice as Wynsomme Wynnie.

Came to New York and did newspaper work.

(Concluded on page 240)

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MR. MOTUS' EAR

Sirs:

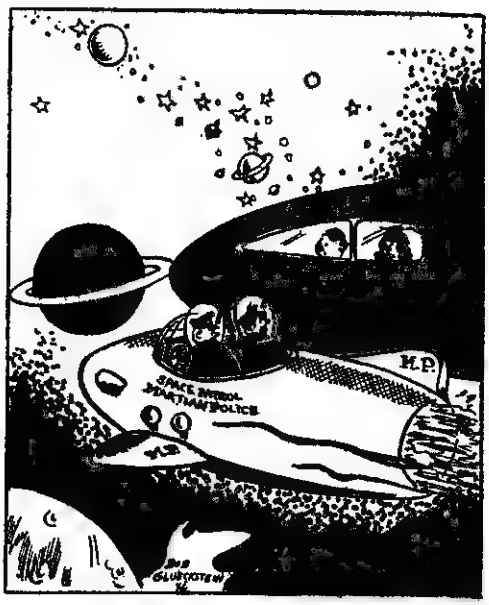
In the story, "Invisible Men Of Mars" by Edgar Rice Burroughs, there is one part I can't understand. How could Motus have his ear cut off when he was wearing a glass helmet?

For reference, page 32 top of column 2, "Motus wore a strange glass helmet . . ." Page 34 bottom of first column, "I took off one of his ears neatly . . ." and bottom of column 2 same page, "As he fell, his glass helmet smashed . . ."

This last statement shows that he had his glass helmet on all through the duel. Maybe you can explain it?

MRS. JEAN OWEN,
7729 N. Hermitage,
Chicago, Illinois.

Yes, we can explain it. Mr. St. John, who painted the cover, put that helmet on because the painting lacked "science" without it. Mr. Burroughs did not *have helmets on his characters. So, your editor, very very efficiently! wrote in the helmet scene, tried ineptly to explain why, and danged if he didn't forget that doggone ear! But at least you can't say it isn't amazing.—Ed.*



"Pull over to Saturn, youse!"

FIVE REASONS . . .

Sirs:

There are five very good reasons why I buy AS. One: Paul's back covers. Two: always six swell stories to read. Three: plenty of swell illustrations by Julian S. Krupa, Robert Fuqua, Rod Ruth, and all the rest. Four: Ah yes, I mustn't forget the photos in McGivern's yarn "Convoy To Atlantis," by William P. McGivern. Five: the swell cartoons.

"Convoy to Atlantis" was an exciting novel that won't be forgotten.

NORMAN GREEN,
1462 East 23rd Street,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

We have more than six stories to read this time. Does that make your number two reason better? And Rod Ruth, we predict, will have the fans throwing beer steins aloft in enthusiasm before very long. About those photos—some of our readers think they were retouched. We swear they weren't, and we have the originals to prove it. As to how we got 'em, we use a time machine. Just see if it don't happen that way!—Ed.

HMM! DOES HE MEAN US?!

Sirs:

It is truly unbelievable how a magazine can produce such a consistent high calibre brand of stories. I have been an ardent reader of Amazing Stories for almost three years, and can honestly say that I have yet to read a story that I did not like. Congratulations, gentlemen, congratulations!

NICHOLAS RAKOTIS,
215 John Street,
Latrobe, Pa.

We knew it all the time, but it's sure nice to hear you say it so definitely! Thanks.—Ed.

CUTTING DISCUSSIONS . . .

Sirs:

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bigger departments the better. To heck with the stories!

Paul Cox,
3401 6th Ave.,
Columbus, Georgia.

We've just about had our ears taken off by the readers who want to have us reinstate the longer readers column, so, back we go, next month, to a longer column." However we won't agree, "to heck with the stories"! We're giving you extra stories this month, 96 more pages of 'em! —Ed.

MR. & MRS. ACTIVE FAN

Sirs:

There are two main reasons for this letter regarding the November issue.

First, a few words about the observatory. I want to agree whole-heartedly with your statements concerning fans. My husband and I have recently become active fans, with a club, fanmag, etc. We have both been shocked at finding fandom so completely disorganized. And these feuds. Importance in fandom seems to be based on the amount of feuds that one is engaged in. We are vastly discouraged. Why can't the fans unite and pull together?

My second reason is the November cover. Fuqua certainly did himself proud. That cover was the only thing that persuaded me to open the mag after the last issue.

I should like to congratulate your companion magazine POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY. Being rank beginners in photography, I cannot say how much help this mag has been. We have never been disappointed with an issue of it. Also of immense help is the LITTLE TECHNICAL LIBRARY.

Mrs. Lorraine Smith,
1845 Prince Street,
Berkeley, Calif.

If your editor were to publish all the letters from readers who sprang up to defend our comments about the factors you mention concerning fandom, we really would have no stories in the issue. Now, with all this flood of opinion, we take hope. It seems the readers want organization and cooperation. It looks like it will come to pass. We'll certainly have more to say about it—and so will many of you, and old-time fans. We'll referee—but the battle isn't ours. We're non-interventionists in these things, until we get called nasty names without cause or proof. We get to "feudin" then too!—Ed.

CONGRATULATIONS FOR KRUPA

Sirs:

May I congratulate Mr. Krupa on the "Nightmare" art! It was terrific.

And those articles! And those cartoons! And that boy Glueckstein's priceless humor! Ah-h-h!

Mrs. Dolores Lapi,
42-47th Street,
Weehawken, N. J.

Krupa will be tickled to know you liked that illustration. We always sneer at him—in fun! We only wish he had time for more.—Ed.

STORIES RANKED

Sirs:

I rank the stories in the November issue as follows:

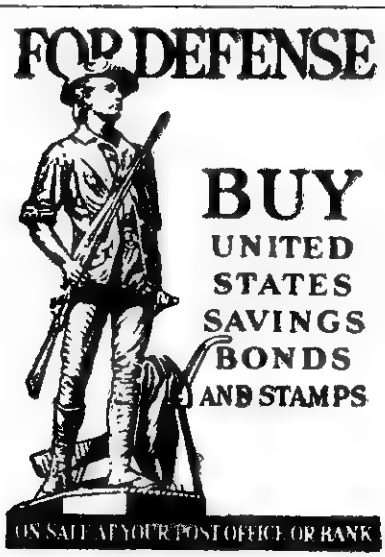
***½ Convoy to Atlantis.
***½ Armageddon, 1948.
*** Stevedore of Jupiter.
*** Nicolbee's Nightmare.
*** Death Desert.
**½ Short-Wave Superman.

Paul's back cover was superb. He always draws that way. Fuqua's front cover was so-so. Get Magarian back please, and more drawings by Krupa. The jokes (?) this month were awful.

"Disciples of Death" better be good. It starts in the January issue, I think.

THOMAS MOORE,
46 Poplar Street,
Cambridge, Md.

"Disciples of Death" was crowded out because of our special issue. But we'll announce its appearance later. It will be good!—Ed.



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MEET THE AUTHORS

(Concluded from page 235)

Wrote advertising copy. Was assistant bookkeeper, salesman, and actor, on Broadway and in the sticks. Had a one-act play produced (Philly). Was laborer, then assistant cameraman, in movie studio in Yonkers. Somehow got to be editor of several magazines at Clayton's.

Have since been, variously, publicity writer, bibliographer, perfessor of English (yes!), and writer of some Science Fiction yarns. Sell everything, but hate to write. I'd rather play tennis. Lately I've been turning into an inventor. *Modus operandi desideratumissime* (Latin): work hard and pleasantly for a few weeks, then sit back and receive royalties for seventeen years. I've had setbacks—the war, especially—and the start is particularly slow because it takes so long to get patents; but things look very, very good.

Ah, inventor!

Geeze, what a screwy life! Mebbe there's a lesson in it somewhere, Posterity.—*Harry Bates.*

CORRESPONDENCE CORNER

S. Cadgene, 396 Walnut Street, Englewood, N. J., has a large number of magazines—Cosmopolitan, Redbook, etc., which he wishes to sell—open to offers . . . Russ Bradbury, Company A, 1st Medical Battalion, Fort Devens, Mass., would like to obtain a copy of AMAZING STORIES in which the story, "The Bridge of Light" appeared . . . Lawrence Collins, 1963 Maud Ave., Chicago, Ill., 17 years old would like boys and girls any age to correspond with him. He is interested in science, stamps, aviation, auto mechanics, reading sports, etc. . . . Harold Kleemeyer, 7103-69 Street, Glendale, N. Y., desires to correspond with anyone possessing February, March, April, 1927 issues of AMAZING STORIES, also AS annual for July, 1927 and quarterly for February, 1928 . . . Blain R. Dunmire, 108 Maple Street, Charleroi, Pa., would like to hear from collectors from whom he can obtain first issues of SF mags. He would be interested in hearing from amateur writers of weird and interplanetary yarns, who might possibly be interested in contributing something to his weird fan magazines . . . Fred Schendel, Caixa Postal, 424, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 19 years old,

would like to receive letters from boys or girls of any age from all parts of the world. His hobby is snap-shooting . . . Corp. Robert M. Shinn, Company B, 160th Inf. (Rifle), Camp San Luis Obispo, California, wishes to get in touch with some of the Esperanto fans in Hollywood or Los Angeles . . . R. Gonzalez Fuente Av. Prima vera N. 159, Tacubaya, D. F., Mexico, has for sale a complete collection of AMAZING STORIES, starting with Vol. 1, No. 1 (April, 1926) to Vol. XII, No. 7 (December, 1938) including all copies published, Quarterlies, Annuals, etc. . . . Jack Townsend, Box 604, Wilson, N. C., desires to correspond with fans interested in radio. . . . Neil Sheffield, 7107 Ave. E., Houston, Texas, 19 years old, is interested in our Latin-American neighbors. He can speak Spanish and would like to hear from persons who would correspond with him partly if not completely, in that language . . . Robert Burnett, 326 S. Second St., Rockford, Ill., would like pen pals, male or female interested in writing and electricity,—prompt replies . . . Robert Wise, 642 Evergreen Ave., Youngstown, Ohio, would like to correspond especially with inhabitants of Mexico or New Orleans. He is 18 and interested in radio, stamps, physics, traveling. Also speaks French and Spanish . . . Pvt. 1cl. Joseph A. Saracena, 100 First Military Police Battalion, Fort Dix, N. J., would be glad to answer anyone in the western hemisphere . . . Dave McIlwain, 14 Cotswold St., Liverpool, 7, England, wishes to get in touch with Esperantists and esp-ists-to-be in America, north and south . . . Brice Paulsell, 5929 Catina Street, New Orleans, La., wants readers of SF who are interested in forming a club to write to him . . . James Daley, 6 Bearse Ave., Dorchester, Mass., would like to exchange the Burroughs novel, "The Moon Maid" for the "Land That Time Forgot" or "King Kong" . . . Tom Ludowitz, 2232 Rainier, Everett, Washington, has the following new books for sale at $1.00 each:—Carson of Venus; Lost on Venus; Pirates of Venus; Tanar of Pellucidar; At the Earth's Core; Pellucidar! A Princess of Mars; The Gods of Mars; The Warlords of Mars; Thurvia, Maid of Mars; The Chessmen of Mars; The Master Mind of Mars . . . James T. Kerr, 11 Nassau Road, Upper Montclair, N. J., would like to obtain copies of the first three issues of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and also a copy of The New Adam . . . Lee W. Davis, 3024 16th Street, Detroit, Mich., would very much like correspondence from both sexes who are interested in political economics and social science . . . George Naone, Medical Detachment, 298th Infantry, Schofield Barracks, T. H., wants pen pals on the mainland. He is 20 years of age and of Hawaiian ancestry, is five feet seven inches tall and weighs 150 pounds. His hobby consists of collecting pictures of all different countries, swimming, bowling, and playing baseball . . . Louise E. Hilliard, 16 Kimball Road, Arlington, Mass., would like to hear from anyone interested in history, art, travel, the Army, or fantastic fiction especially in the Regular Army or the Marine Corps . . . Dan King, No. 3

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